

[**you don't like the way i talk \(then why am i on your mind?\)**](#) by [**stardustupinlights**](#)

Series: a situation, so heavenly [1]

Category: Yu-Gi-Oh! VRAINS

Genre: Awkward Conversations, Awkward Kissing, Awkwardness, Christmas, Confusion, Domestic, First Date, I Wrote This Instead of Sleeping, M/M, Mild Hurt/Comfort, Or Is It?, Ryouken Is Making It Up As He Goes, Yuusaku Is Whipped, but not really, the title is much more deep than this is, there's a plot somewhere in here, they're messy, very awkward kissing

Characters: Ai | Ignis, Fujiki Yuusaku, Homura Takeru, Kusanagi Shouichi, Revolver | Kougami Ryouken, Shima Naoki, they're there for like three seconds

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Summary:

It starts with Takeru making an innocent question and everything spirals down from there.

("Hello?" Yusaku snaps his mouth shut, teeth clicking loudly, and Ai snickers from somewhere in the room, no longer inhabiting his phone. He left it on speaker, and no matter how many times he presses the hang up button, it won't do anything. "Playmaker? Is something the matter?"

Yusaku feels himself flushing red from his chest to his ears, and he glares at Ai, thinking that, if he survives this interaction, he'll be becoming a line of broken code and nothing more.)

It's all Ai's fault.

Relationships: Fujiki Yuusaku/Revolver | Kougami Ryouken

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1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Hello! So, this is the first work I've ever uploaded but not the first I've written, so any suggestions, comments, questions or (constructive) criticism are welcome! A fair warning: English is not my first language, so if you see any mistakes with grammar or the meaning of words, tell me and I'll make sure to fix it!

I genuinely hope you enjoy this read and thank you! You can find me @stardustupinlights on tumblr as well, so you're welcome to drop by, but I don't really post many things, so don't make much activity from me, sorry!

"What are you doing for Christmas, Yusaku?"

Blinking, Yusaku comes back to reality, tearing his eyes away from his monitor's screen and looking at Takeru, who's stretching in his chair holding a mug of hot chocolate on one of his hands. They're having a look at some information Ghost Girl managed to acquire about SOL's movements, but so far there was nothing specific, just emails and reports, and they guessed they would have to look deeper to find anything worthwhile. Kusanagi-san is out stretching his legs and they're by themselves, having worked on this for several hours now without much rest, so it's no wonder then that Yusaku is a bit surprised by the question, seeing as it has nothing to do with their current task, and that it should be obvious that he has nothing to do on Christmas.

"I'm going to be looking at the rest of these files and helping Kusanagi-san all day," he answers, shifting his eyes back to the document he was reading but not really processing the words. He's starting to feel tired. "Why do you ask?"

Takeru shrugs, shooting him a grin.

"Just curious is all," he hums, taking a sip of his drink, rubbing his eyes with his fingers. Perhaps a break is due soon. "Are you really just going to lock yourself in your apartment and work?"

"I've never really celebrated Christmas," Yusaku admits, linking his fingers together under the table, trying to warm up his hands. The winter has been especially hard on him lately, and he finds himself struggling to get sleep at night because the heating in his shit-hole of an apartment stopped working. He was hoping that working on this would help him get tired enough to achieve sleep tonight, "you're going back home, right?"

"Yeah, but I don't feel too good about leaving you here by yourself," Takeru frowns, staring down at his keyboard. "I could keep you company instead if you want."

Yusaku shakes his head, closing his eyes and leaning back into his chair. He feels flattered by his worry, but he couldn't let him so that; he knew that Christmas was important for families.

"Don't worry about me. Kusanagi-san will work during the morning until lunch and then head to spent some time with Jin, so I won't be alone all day, and Ai will be there too," Yusaku pauses, hesitating a bit. "Thank you for the offer, though, but you should go home. I'm sure your family misses you, and Kiku as well."

"Ah, well, if you insist," Takeru mumbles, face going a bit red, and he takes another sip of his chocolate, still looking thoughtful. "Are you sure there's no one special you could spend the rest of the day with?"

'There's someone special indeed.' Yusaku thinks, a bit of a bitter smile curling his lips upwards. He shouldn't go there right now, because he knows it will ruin the rest of his evening, maybe even keep him up; Revolver – *Ryoken, his name is Ryoken, how fitting* – was unreachable for now, somewhere on a yacht in the ocean with the rest of the Knights of Hanoi, and he was unlikely to reappear until he had any news about Lighting or SOL's movements himself. As much as Yusaku wishes things could be different, they weren't, and for now, he shouldn't be making any illusions to himself. Revolver made a promise about dealing with their own hang-ups

with each other after everything that had to happen happened, and Yusaku would wait for as long as he needed him to. He knew Revolver wasn't one to back out on a promise just like that and Takeru's question is deeper than he probably intended it to be, so the impact they have on Yusaku reflect on his words.

"No, but you don't have to worry, I'll be fine," Yusaku insists, and if his voice sounds just a bit too cutting, a bit too harsh, then there's no need to point it out. "We should go back to work."

Despite believing that he would be fine by himself, no, *knowing* that he would be because he's been spending Christmas alone for years, Takeru's words weight heavily on his chest for the rest of the evening. He barely gets anything else done because of the thoughts running around in his head, and decides to call it an early night for all of their sakes: Kusanagi-san is clutching his coffee cup for dear life, Ai and Flame long gone to chill inside their Duel Disks, and Takeru could barely keep himself awake long enough to go through the documents anymore. He has a train to take in the morning and Kusanagi-san is long done with selling any food, so they pick up the chairs and tables and say their goodbyes to each other, Takeru promising to call after he's back at home. Yusaku walks instead of taking the offered ride with Kusanagi-san, using the excuse that he wants to enjoy the snow and that his apartment isn't that far, but in reality, all he wants is a bit of quietness.

That's when Ai decides to speak, of course.

"Eh, Playmaker, is something on your mind?" He says, peering up at him from his duel disk. Yusaku barely spares him a glances before looking ahead at the sidewalk, ignoring him. "Hey, there's no need to be rude! I saw you looking!"

Yusaku sighs, conceding, "I'm fine, Ai. Just a little cold."

"That doesn't seem to be it, though. You've been quiet ever since Soulburner asked you about your Christmas plans!" His tone is accusatory, and Yusaku rolls his eyes, tempted to press the mute button before he runs across

someone on the street that thinks his AI is malfunctioning. Which, as far as Yusaku is concerned, he might be. "Don't ignore me!"

"I don't celebrate Christmas, that's all. I have no attachment to the celebration, and Takeru's question struck me as odd," Yusaku admits, wanting to get him off his back. He glances down at the eye in his duel disk again and shrugs, blinking. "That's all. Are you happy now?"

Ai stays quiet for a long while, tricking him into thinking he's safe from further questioning, but he speaks up again as Yusaku is opening the door to his apartment, almost making him drop the key in alarm because his voice sounds way too loud against the cold backdrop of street silence the weather and the hour brings, everyone on their homes already. They stayed later than he thought.

"Are you thinking about your special person?" He deduces, and Yusaku swallows as he gets his door open, stepping inside and sighing when he realizes that it's almost as cold as it is outside. How lovely. Perhaps he should give the landlord a piece of his mind, considering how on top of his rent he was lately.

"That's none of your business, Ai. Don't push it," he replies, taking off his shoes and hanging his coat. He ventured out on his uniform again today because he's been neglecting his laundry, so he has to also take off his blazer and tie before he's able to grab a new shirt to sleep in from his bedroom and throw this one into the full basket in the corner of the living room.

"I'm just asking!" Ai complains loudly, and Roboppy vacuums her way towards them, giving them an excited 'Welcome home, Masters!' before turning back towards the TV, a cooking show Yusaku was watching earlier that day still on. Ai continues. "See if I ever worry about your emotional state again if you keep giving me the cold shoulder!"

Yusaku goes into his bedroom, Roboppy following behind, probably waiting to talk to Ai about the day's shenanigans, and sets the Duel Disk on his desk to search for a pair of clean sweatpants and a shirt, realizing with a frown there's only one of each left. He *really* needs to do his laundry.

"I didn't ask you to worry, Ai. I just don't want to talk about that subject," Yusaku insists, feeling like today has been the day of people - did Ai count as people? He thought so – worrying unnecessarily. Must be the Christmas in the air. "You can watch your awful telenovela while I work tonight."

"Oh, thank you, Master!" Roboppy chirps happily, going back to the living room, and he hears the TV changing from the cooking channel to the nauseatingly bad show she and Ai love as she exclaims: "Season five should be starting tonight!"

"Don't think you can trick me into leaving you alone like this!" Ai exclaims, and Yusaku drops himself into his bed, ignoring him and opening his laptop.

He said he was going to work to get himself tired enough to sleep through the cold, but he's actually kind of sick of reading endless documents, so he logs into social media to look at the news. Apparently, there was a Christmas event coming up on Link VRAINS, so he would have to download a new update if he wanted to be able to log in and do anything, which was bothersome considering how they needed to keep up with Lighting's movements. Ai is still talking in the background, but Yusaku tunes him out completely, considering whether it would be a good idea or not to log into his second account in VRAINS during the event to collect the awards, thinking it may be a satisfying way of spending the holidays other than suffering through another terrible season of Ai's and Roboppy's show.

He's halfway through reading an extensive list of possible Ultra Rare rewards for the event when Ai's words start to process.

"... dea! I'll call him so you won't miss him, and then you'll stop ignoring the issue. Emotional fulfillment is important during the holidays, Playmaker-chan!"

Yusaku's head snaps at him. "What—"

But it's too late, because Ai is already looking through the synchronized contact list on his duel disk to get into his phone and hack his way into the

dial-up app, a number automatically appearing on it, and Yusaku panics, dropping his laptop on the bed and frantically grabbing his phone to hang up, but Ai disabled the touchscreen, devious thing that he is.

The call starts, and the phone rings with the dialing sound.

"Ai, I swear, if you don't hang up in this second I *will* personally deliver you to Hanoi—"

"Hello?" Yusaku snaps his mouth shut, teeth clicking loudly, and Ai snickers from somewhere in the room, no longer inhabiting his phone. He left it on speaker, and no matter how many times he presses the hang up button, it won't do anything. "Playmaker? Is something the matter?"

Yusaku feels himself flushing red from his chest to his ears, and he glares at Ai, thinking that, if he survives this interaction, he'll be becoming a line of broken code and nothing more.

"Playmaker? Hello?" Revolver calls out again, and Yusaku sighs, knowing he'll have to deal with this. He wonders if this would just give Revolver another reason to eradicate the Ignises if Yusaku were to explain the situation, so he decides to keep Ai out of it just in case.

"Revolver, uh," he says, flushing even deeper. This is *weird*, for several reasons, but he doesn't have the time to separate them into three sets. "Sorry, it seems that I uh— butt dialed you on accident." *Yes, because that's totally plausible*, he thinks, closing his eyes briefly.

"Ok?" Revolver answers and Yusaku facepalms himself, while Ai dies laughing silently in the background. He's so dead. "Is there any problem?"

Curse Revolver's intuition, Yusaku thinks, and clears his throat, trying to not make the situation worse.

"Um, no. Not at all." Yusaku answers, and he can practically see, despite the fact that it's impossible for him to do so, the bewildered and suspicious expression Revolver must be wearing.

"Well..." He starts, and the silence drags on for way too long to be anything but awkward. "Are you going to hang up?"

Yusaku stifles a long-suffering sigh by dropping his head on his pillow, feeling like he just may die on him. It would certainly make more interesting news than the VRAINS event. He could practically see the headlines.

"No, I'm fine like this," Yusaku chokes out, and then, hopefully, "What about you?"

"Actually," Revolver says, and Yusaku's heart rate picks up. *No way*, he thinks. *He can't be for real*. "I wanted to speak with you face to face about a few things. Are you doing anything on Christmas?"

That question again? He thinks, starting to feel a little patronized by everyone, though it hardly was Revolver's or Takeru's fault, considering he was the one being annoyed about it without reason.

"No, I'll be working on Christmas till around noon, but it'll be pretty busy," Yusaku explains, hardly believing what's happening, the idea of actually setting up a meeting with him instead of having him drop unexpectedly on them and giving Yusaku heart palpitations feeling pretty out there. Getting his phone number had been a hassle, so this was kind of amazing, in a way. Suddenly, remembering that Kusanagi-san will be going right to Jin after closing, Yusaku continues, not wanting to lose this chance, "perhaps you could catch us as we close?"

"Ah, I'm afraid that won't be possible. You have the afternoon free?" He asks, voice light, and Yusaku feels like he's hallucinating. How can this conversation be happening right now? Revolver barely sounds like he feels anything but casual, despite the fact that they're, technically, rivals, if not enemies, even thought Yusaku would pretty much like to change that.

"Yes, I'll be in my apartment," he replies, suspecting where this is going. He's proved right not two seconds later:

"Great, see you then."

Revolver hangs up.

Yusaku stares at his phone screen for an undefined amount of time, until he tries it out and discovers that Ai is now *completely* out of his phone, the touchscreen back on working order. Revolver never asked for his address, but Yusaku wasn't about to text him, or, even worse, call him again, so he decided he would deal with that tomorrow when time came. He was tired.

He turns towards Ai, squinting. "I don't know if I should delete you or thank you."

Ai winks at him, somehow, and Roboppy reappears to pick him up, the first few notes of the opening theme song resonating across the room from the living room, apparently having set up the show where they left off.

"Take it as a Christmas gift, Playmaker!" Ai exclaims as he's taken away, making Yusaku sigh. He won't let the Christmas thing go, will he?

And with that, Yusaku returns to reading the list of Event Rewards for the Christmas Event, feeling like he has done enough for the day. He's only mildly disappointed to realize they suck.

He can't have a win, can he?

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

Happy New Year everyone!!! Hope you had a great year, and that this one is just as great, if not better. Enjoy reading!!

(wow this is about double the number of words the previous chapter was. no idea how that happened!)

The next morning, Yusaku wakes up early and goes about cleaning his apartment a bit, a process that consists of moving his furniture around so Roboppy can properly vacuum the entire floor and washing all his dishes, as well as actually going to the laundromat – that's thankfully just a few blocks away – to deal with the bigger than normal amount of dirty clothes he's accumulated ever since Jin got taken by Lighting and his focus shifted into that. He spends a good amount of time only on that, because he has been neglecting it horribly, so much that even Ai complains about it, saying it makes him seem unhygienic when he was anything but, and he has to go out wearing the clothes he slept on because he really doesn't want to add more to the pile so soon.

Ai has been bothering him all morning about trying to make his place look semi-decent for his special person by making an actual effort in cleaning, and Yusaku hardly has the will to deny it because it's truth; he may be a loner teenager that can barely take care of himself, but he doesn't need to show it as a first impression. It's basic decency to at least clean one's house a bit before someone comes over anyways, and Revolver lived on a mansion, even if he's now apparently spending all his days on a boat. Yusaku thinks that the temperature in the middle of the ocean during the winter must not be so pleasant, and absent-mindedly wonders if they have a heater on board. There's a lot of things about Revolver living on a boat with four other people that are... questionable, at best.

Still, he can hardly talk when he's been going through almost all of December without a heater. Yusaku's bound to get sick at some point if he

didn't get that fixed, but it was easy to forget with everything that was happening around him lately.

After his clothes are clean again, he changes into a dark blue long-sleeved sweater that's just a bit on the thin side because of how old it is, but it's one of the warmest things he has, and winter boots, wrapping himself in a jacket and scarf to go out and face the day, essentially preparing for his shift at Café Nagi. He takes Ai with him despite not planning to, thinking it may be wise to have him around just in case, and tells Kusanagi-san about what happened last night as he sets out the tables, and he heats up the grill to cook Yusaku a highly unhealthy breakfast of plain hotdogs that he skipped in favor of having his clothes washed.

"That's hilarious," Kusanagi-san chuckles, shooting Yusaku a kind smile, but sending Ai a reproachful look. He looks vaguely exhausted, much like Yusaku feels, but it doesn't make him look any less ready to face the day, and he proves that by clicking his hotdog tongs together at Ai menacingly. "But you shouldn't do that again, I don't think prank calling Revolver and roping Yusaku into it is a good idea."

"It wasn't a prank call, though! I just wanted Yusaku-chan to cheer up," Ai corrects, or at least tries to, because Yusaku slams the mute button – much more enthusiastically than he needs to - before he can elaborate, just to punish him. He's not going to let him enjoy this situation at all.

"At least it didn't go wrong," Yusaku says, shrugging and keeping his face blank as he leans on the table that's closest to Kusanagi, watching him cook the hotdogs for the two of them and ignoring the crude gestures Ai's making his way. "He would have probably shown up about right now if I hadn't told him we'd be busy."

"Can't say that's not a relief," Kusanagi sighs and sets Yusaku's hotdog on the pick-up counter. He walks over and stretches his arm to grab it and take a bite, not minding how hot it is; he's famished, and there's probably little things on this earth capable of stopping him from eating, his own incapacity to stomach food sometimes be damned. "Go put Ai inside, clients should be arriving any time now."

Yusaku follows his orders, climbing inside the truck and locking Ai inside the desk drawer, finishing off his breakfast as quickly as possible. Kusanagi-san hands him a small black coffee for him to swallow his food down, and Yusaku nods at him thankfully, gulping it fast as well, ignoring his disapproving look and changing out of his jacket and scarf to put on his apron so they can get to work, the first clients of the day arriving after a short wait.

The rest of the morning passes quickly in a flurry of movement; Café Nagi is not understaffed by any means and does relatively well during all four seasons because of the desserts and drinks on the menu, but their clientele is certainly a bit more overwhelming during the holidays. He barely has any time to think about Revolver visiting his apartment later, much less to be worried about it, and when lunchtime rolls around he's just not thinking at all outside of what orders he needs to take and give to Kusanagi-san, and which client ordered their coffee and deep fried hotdog first. The amount of customers only dies down around two o'clock in the afternoon, but despite being absolutely ravenous, he helps Kusanagi-san pack up so he can be off to spend the day with Jin instead of asking for another hotdog.

“Ah, Yusaku, I almost forgot,” Kusanagi says, once everything is loaded into the truck and he’s getting into the front seat to leave. He leans over the window to look down at him and offers him a smile, eyes fond. Yusaku will probably never get used to that, no matter how often he notices it. “I transferred your salary to your account already, plus something extra, as an early gift.”

Yusaku feels his ears heat up. “That wasn’t necessary, Kusanagi-san...” he complains, but only half-heartily, drifting off after he says it. He knows Kusanagi-san would have probably found a way to give him the money early anyways. “...but thank you.”

“Don’t worry about it, Yusaku. You’ve been really helpful,” he pauses, looking off to the side with a bit of a nostalgic smile, and Yusaku guesses he must be thinking about Jin, making him glance down to stare at the floor for a moment, thinking of how much-unwarranted suffering he has gone through without even knowing it. Kusanagi-san smiles at him again, waving. “See you in two days, Yusaku. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas, Kusanagi-san. Sent Jin my regards.” Yusaku mumbles, and he nods, shooting him another smile before driving away, leaving Yusaku alone on the plaza.

He walks back to his apartment slowly, despite the fact that he’s cold and hungry, because he’s just a bit upset about the idea of Kusanagi-san spending his Christmas next to a comatose Jin, and the next day as well. The holidays mean nothing to him, not really, so Yusaku had insisted that working on the 25th wasn’t a problem, but Kusanagi-san was stubborn about Yusaku earning a break, so he couldn’t really put up much of a fight, especially when he knew Kusanagi-san also needed to wind down and relax from the pressure of Jin’s attack. Yusaku hates that they’re sort of in a dull point right now, without really progressing or even facing complications from Lighting or SOL, the quietness of their movements making him uneasy. Neither of the Kusanagi brothers deserves to spend the holidays this way, and even Yusaku, who was used to being by himself all the time on Christmas, felt that something was missing in the air as they talked today, Takeru’s absence also being glaringly obvious, leaving their new group dynamic unbalanced. He hadn’t realized just how used he got to be around people.

Yusaku is so caught up on his own thoughts about the source of his unease with the holidays this year – apart from the rough Ignis and the evil corporation that wanted his head, of course – that he pays no mind to the parked car outside of his apartment, up until he hears a door being opened and closed as he pulls out his house keys, and his shoulders tense when he hears footsteps approaching. He takes a deep breath to calm down, thinking that it may be someone that’s just lost and going to ask for directions, but it doesn’t keep him from jumping slightly when Revolver, who Yusaku *forgot* was coming, talks.

“Playmaker,” he says, and pauses, probably surprised by Yusaku’s reaction. He turns to look at him, and he feels a bit shocked when he realizes Revolver’s not wearing his usual grey blazer and pink shirt combination, but rather a white t-shirt under a black coat with shining silver buttons, dark fancy shoes, and black jeans, along with a grey and white plaid scarf. Paired with his white hair and pale eyes against the backdrop of snow the winter

brings, he looks like he walked right out of a fashion magazine, and Yusaku stares, thinking that he most likely looks like an idiot. Revolver curves an eyebrow at him, glancing at the door. “Are we going inside, or would you like to have this meeting elsewhere?”

Yusaku flushes a bit and for once gives thanks to the cold and his pale skin for helping him by giving him an excuse to hide it. Instead of answering, Yusaku jams his key into the lock like he needs to do to get it to properly fit, making Revolver’s eyebrows curve up further, and turns it, opening the door and stepping in, holding it open for him.

“Welcome back, Master!” Roboppy says, approaching happily, but she stops a bit abruptly when she notices Revolver, and the emoji on her screen turns into a flustered face. “Oh, Master brought a friend! Master should have notified Roboppy that he has such a good looking friend, so she could prepare something for him!”

Yusaku slams the door closed a bit more harshly than necessary, feeling like maybe, after all, he should join Hanoi’s cause, because all AI’s around him were clearly trying to kill him through sheer embarrassment. Revolver looks extremely amused by this development, his lips smirking as he glances at Yusaku, apparently flattered by Roboppy’s bluntness.

“That’s alright, Roboppy, we’re just having a chat,” Yusaku says and starts the motion of taking off his shoes and unwrapping himself from his scarf and jacket, Revolver following at his beckoning. “Why don’t you go watch your show?”

“Show?” Yusaku hears Revolver mumble from behind him, and he momentarily closes his eyes. Yusaku refuses to explain what he means by that, just to save himself the trouble, letting him assume whatever he wanted about the possibilities of a house helper robot enjoying an afternoon program targeted to middle age mothers. There are things about his own life that Yusaku just stopped questioning at some point.

“Alright, Master, as you wish!” Roboppy turns happily, starting to roll her way back to Yusaku’s cramped living room to watch her show, but she suddenly stops and turns back around, looking up at Yusaku with a question

sign on her screen. “May Roboppy ask where Ai-sama is at? He promised to tell Roboppy about a new show.”

Yusaku freezes, and then, very conscious of Revolver’s eyes on him, clears his throat, realizing something:

He completely forgot about leaving Ai on the desk drawer at Kusanagi’s truck.

“I’m sorry, Roboppy, but we won’t be seeing him until the 26th, he is...” Yusaku pauses, hesitating, and glances at Revolver who is, *with reason*, judging him silently. “He is... hanging out with Takeru and Flame.”

He doesn’t know exactly why he lies, but he thinks it might be to save some of his dignity. Roboppy gives him a sad emoji before turning to actually go watch her program now, and Yusaku follows after her, feeling like he just lost six years of his life, leading Revolver to his bedroom so the TV and Roboppy’s presence won’t distract them.

“The Dark Ignis is not with Soulburner, is it?” Revolver inquiries, voice a bit playful, from behind him and Yusaku turns to glare at him, not liking his smugness at all. Instead of glaring back though, he looks around Yusaku’s excuse of a home as they go through the hallway to his room, expression turning into a frown. “Do you live in these conditions all the time?”

Yusaku clenches his teeth, trying not to groan out loud. “We can’t all live in a seaside mansion,” he retorts, making Revolver tilt his head in what looks like agreement, and frowns himself when he remembers something. “How did you get my address? I never told you where I lived.”

Revolver has the dignity to look a bit sheepish this, his eyes moving away from his face for a split second.

“Ah, right. I already knew where you lived,” he says, and Yusaku stares, crossing his arms, but perhaps he should have expected this. Revolver raises an eyebrow. “It doesn’t take much to hack into a school system to look up someone’s address, you know?”

Yusaku wonders if he's always such a dick when he goes into other people's living place, but he has to admit he's right about Yusaku's address being pretty easy to get, and also about his apartment being questionable for habitation at best: he should have seen it before Yusaku cleaned it. Yusaku wonders vaguely if Revolver knowing his home address and current school counts as stalking, and then decides he's not the right person to judge something like that, considering he too hacked into any database he needed without shame.

"I guess you have a point, I should have expected it," Yusaku shrugs, not changing his expression, keeping it blank. Revolver seems to swallow down some words, apparently not looking to make this interaction any more tense and weird for either of them, and Yusaku sits on his bed, gesturing for him to take a seat at his computer desk and crossing his arms again. "What did you want to talk about?"

Revolver sits with as much grace as he always seems to radiate, his back straight as a board, leaning back into Yusaku's desk with his elbow and linking his hands together, the red tattoo of Hanoi's logo fully visible and creating a deep contrast with his white shirt, cold gaze focused on his face. Yusaku thinks he should be jealous about his ability to look so casual, elegant and menacing at the same time, but he genuinely can only admire it, again returning to the thought that he could easily be a model in a high fashion magazine. He's quickly snapped out such irrelevant thoughts, however, when Revolver starts talking, and he focuses on the words, knowing that they're going to be discussing serious matters that might just be crucial details.

"I have reasons to believe that whatever SOL Technologies is developing is far more dangerous than what we initially thought," he reveals, voice smooth, going right to the point. Yusaku raises his eyebrows. "It begs for further research, of course, because my source can only tell me so much, but I'm aware you have been sent files that include emails between executives, so there might be an allusion to it in those."

Yusaku shakes his head, frowning. "We've been going through the files for about two days now, but nothing useful or big has come up. There are mentions of a big project, but no specifics. We still have a lot of files to get

through, since there's only three of us," he pauses, frowning; if Revolver is worrying about this, then it must be bad. "What does your source think they're working on?"

Revolver's eyes are steel behind the crystal clear blue. "They're developing a new piece of tech that they tried on Go Onizuka as a prototype. I'm sure you have an idea just from that."

Yusaku stares down at the floor, several possibilities running through his mind, but the answer is almost painfully obvious to him. Would SOL really try to do something like that? It seemed insane; there's a difference between wanting to use the Ignises data and copying it for implants and possible mass distribution.

"An AI for the human brain?" Yusaku asks just to be safe, and Revolver nods, his fingers tapping against his own hand. He's not pleased with the idea, and he can only imagine that this is another good reason for Hanoi to completely destroy the Ignises, but Yusaku won't touch that subject if he can avoid it, determined to make this meeting go as painless as possible, and he has a lot of questions already. He starts off easy: "How does it work?"

"I was not given many specifics, but it's apparently a chip implanted on the brain, much like Onizuka claimed," he explains, eyes drifting from Yusaku's face to the floor and back again, deep in thought but focused on the conversation. "My guess is that the data from the Ignises will be duplicated and experimented on until they manage to make it compatible with the human brain, but they could also just use Onizuka as a patient zero situation and keep experimenting on him until he gives or they have a breakthrough."

Yusaku closes his eyes, feeling a bit nauseous. The idea of Go being used as an experiment, however willingly – and does Yusaku hopes that changes – is disturbing, and the concept of wanting to completely modify the way the human brain works by installing a chip is just astonishing, and not in a good way. Just like with Dr. Kogami's experiments, there are things humans should not toy with, but they were pretty bad at learning if this repeat of history was any indication. Dr. Kogami had at least realized that what he

did was wrong, even if it was for the most questionable reasons, but there's no telling how far a whole company will go before stopping, and if they ever will. Yusaku tries to will away memories from his time as a guinea pig instead of letting them resurface right now, but he still feels extremely cold and uncomfortable, his skin itching and a few of his remaining scars burning slightly in phantom pain. Despite doing better ever since the Tower of Hanoi, nightmares still haunted him at night, reminding him that PTSD can't be cured overnight, no matter how much he tried to accomplish that feat for years.

“What do you suppose we could do about this?” Yusaku asks, opening his eyes, even though he fears being overwhelmed by the information if he focuses on the outside, on the physical, on the need to scratch his arms. His brain is safe; he'll have his breakdown later, but for now, he wants to stay focused, to know what their options may be. He has a feeling he won't like them.

Revolver blinks slowly like he was considering the meaning of his words, and shifts in Yusaku's chair, now leaning his elbows on top of his knees, propping his head on his intertwined fingers and looking right at him.

“The obvious answer is to permanently eliminate the Ignises, of course,” he offers, and Yusaku tenses up. Revolver does not react to that. “But there are other possibilities, though we would have to carefully lay them out. For example: deleting all of their databases so they won't be able to continue the investigation.”

“Or getting the people in charge of the project fired after a massive mistake under their control,” Yusaku suggests, and Revolver nods his head appreciatively, biting his lip in thought. “We could leak the information, and the public could take care of the rest. Onizuka could act as proof that that type of technology is not safe.”

“That's an interesting idea, but leaking that means telling everyone about the Lost Incident as well,” Revolver says, and to Yusaku's surprise, he doesn't sound defensive about it. After briefly recalibrating, he can see why; it's not necessary for Hanoi's role to be mentioned, but that creates another problem that Revolver quickly points out: “It wouldn't be an issue

for me, because then everyone would know about the virus that took my father's life and several other questionable choices SOL has made to this day, but it would also implicate disclosing who the victims were."

Yusaku feels all blood drain from his face at the idea. All of their names, the things that happened to them, the police reports, the cover-up, the trauma, the therapy, would then be for everyone to have a look at, no longer something the victims could keep to themselves and learn to heal from quietly. Not only that, but there are people at SOL, like Zaizen Akira, that know Playmaker was a victim of the Lost Incident, so his identity would be compromised, and Takeru's as well, their connection to Kusanagi-san only making it more obvious and suspicious, and then there's no telling what SOL could try to do in vengeance; they could easily infect them with a virus as they did to Dr. Kogami. This would affect the lives of every single one of the victims, and Yusaku couldn't imagine that all five of them would agree to it even if he was willing to risk it. Perhaps Spectre would be fine with it for the sake of following his leader's orders, but Jin and Miyu are in a coma until they take care of Lighting or find a way to help them recover their consciousness, so that would only leave Takeru, arguably the only one of them that carries a bit of a normal life if one takes Miyu out of the picture, to make it or break it, and he was too much of a wild card to leave that decision to.

Yusaku can't let something like media coverage be the reason their lives complicate even further. It just wouldn't be fair for any of them, even Spectre, whose life is already isolated from any sense of normalcy. Things would never be the same, and outside interference and questioning could make it harder for them to carry normal lives. It just couldn't happen; thinking that this is a rational solution would just bring more problems that would strike more deeply than even the ones they were dealing with in the present time.

"Perhaps we should discuss this again once my source can give me more information," Revolver says, and Yusaku blinks up at him, not startled, but surprised. There's a look in his eye he can't recognize, and Yusaku takes note of it, thinking that maybe Revolver was going over the same things he was in his head. It would be too risky to do such a thing. "Right now there

are still too many questions for my liking. Having your team know about this is a precaution for future developments, so all sides are informed should anything happen to Hanoi or your group.”

“I’ll take a deeper look at these files, and hopefully I’ll find some details,” Yusaku nods, accepting Revolver’s words. It’s best for everyone to be aware of what they’re dealing with and what’s at risk, and this just further proofs that Revolver is truly serious about their alliance, as tentative as it still is. He needs to make some progress as well. “I have time for next couple of days, so—”

“I’ll help you, I got my laptop on the car,” Revolver interrupts, and Yusaku quietens, staring at him incredulously. He was... not expecting this. “I’ll go get it right now—”

“Wait, are you—” Yusaku stops, rethinks his words, and continues. “Are you okay with working with me right now? For the rest of the day?”

Revolver shrugs, standing up from his chair, looking around the room and clearly avoiding Yusaku’s gaze. He ends up staring at Yusaku’s laptop that’s laying on his bed dangerously close to the edge, and his expression twitches before he speaks.

“Of course, Playmaker,” he drawls, again using that strange, playful tone of voice he often carries during their meetings when he’s feeling particularly smug about what he’s saying. Yusaku frowns because it makes it seem like it was obvious that he would stay, like it was normal for them to do this sort of thing. “We’ll move faster like this, and it would be a waste of time for you to send them to me and return to my boat when we’re right here.”

“I guess...” Yusaku concedes, dubious about this situation, and stands up as well. He opens his mouth to ask whether there was something else to talk about before they got to work, but gets rudely interrupted by Roboppy zooming into the room.

“Master, I just remembered!” she cries, making Revolver’s head snap in her direction in surprise, that quickly turns into amusement. “Ai-sama told me

to take care of you if anything happened to him, so I have to ask if you have eaten your second meal of the day!"

Roboppy has a really weird way of phrasing questions sometimes, Yusaku thinks, and then remembers he's actually pretty hungry, but the idea of letting Roboppy cook after what happened last time with the oven makes him cringe. "Roboppy, I'm fine, thanks for reminding me. I'll just order some take-out food."

"Very well, then!" she says, and then returns to the living room. Yusaku looks at Revolver to see him looking mildly disturbed, though he can't tell towards what exactly. He surprises Yusaku with a question:

"Are you really hungry or just indulging her?" He asks, a dead serious expression on his face, and Yusaku blinks and blurts out a "no," thinking that they'll be able to cover a larger amount of documents the earlier they start, only for his stomach to growl loudly. Revolver's face changes as he stares at him, his lips slightly curled up, eyebrows raised and Yusaku sighs, knowing he was beaten by his own appetite.

"I haven't had lunch yet. I completely forgot about it," he confesses, trying not to squirm awkwardly. Revolver has a glint in his eye that's extremely alike his avatar's expression before he's about to do something questionable: morbid excitement. "Why do you ask?"

"Come with me, I'll treat you to lunch," Revolver says and turns to walk to the door, not waiting for a response. Yusaku stares as he keeps talking, "I wasn't planning on doing this meeting today, much less staying, but scheduling issues made me reconsider, so I apologize for intruding in your holidays. Also, I'm starving, and we're probably going to be working late."

Yusaku stands up and hurries after him, almost tripping over Roboppy as they step into the living room, who's watching a scene on the TV unfold with attention. They both glance at it to see a poorly dramatized reveal of someone's husband cheating on them with their sister, and they stare for a solid five seconds before they turn towards each other again, silently agreeing to ignore the atrocities on screen.

“That’s not necessary, I can just order something,” Yusaku points out, feeling a bit winded – *for absolutely no plausible reason* – at the invitation. Revolver is already putting on his shoes, so Yusaku rushes in his attempt to get him to stop being unreasonable; he doesn’t need to be treated to a *Christmas lunch*, of all things. “You don’t need to treat me lunch, I’m fine with working right now and I don’t really celebrate Christmas anyway.”

“All the more reason to take you, then,” Revolver says, voice airy and casual, much like it was when they talked on the phone last night, and it’s so different from his usual no-nonsense manner of speaking that it feels a bit like Yusaku got slapped by the sudden change.

“What are you even—?” Yusaku begins, letting some bewilderment drip into his voice, but Revolver talks over him before he can even be done with his question.

“Holidays are not a time to be alone, Playmaker. I don’t have anything to do for the next couple of days either, other than work on this, and we’re both hungry, so we might as well make the best of it,” he explains, straightening up and looking down at Yusaku while he grabs his scarf – he always forgets Revolver is taller than him, somehow – eyes a lot more open than they were during their discussion. “Unless you really would prefer to just work, in which case, I’ll go look for my laptop while you order your food.”

Yusaku stares up at him, licking his lips that are cracking quite badly from the cold, and watching Revolver as his eyes follow the motion. As he considers the offer, Takeru’s words unwillingly make their way back into his head, making him feel a bit short of breath:

“Are you sure there’s no one special you could spend the rest of the day with?”

There is, he’s standing right in front of him, but Yusaku thought that was just a pipe dream. He never cared for Christmas before, because he never had someone to teach him how to enjoy it, understand it and appreciate it as most people do, and if he ever did, then his memories of it were lost to time and trauma, so he was never conscious of what he may be missing because of that. He thinks about Kusanagi-san spending his Christmas with a

comatose Jin and Takeru going all the way back home just to be there for his family, and he feels a bit of longing for something he's never had swell on his chest, making him feel a bit lonely all of the sudden. It's both a foreign and familiar feeling: he's been longing for someone to be there for him for ages, even if he will never admit it out loud, and in his dreams that someone was always his special person.

And yet, here he is, having this offered to him and saying *no*.

He bends down to grab his winter boots, putting them on. His decision is made.

“Okay, then. Let’s go.”

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(Yusaku doesn’t get to see the relieved expression that crosses Revolver’s face at that moment, but Roboppy is certainly there to witness it.

She can’t wait to tell Ai-sama about this.)

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks for reading! Hope you liked that, and don't worry, I'm quite ahead on the rest of this story, just sorting out details first. See you next week!

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

Oh, wow, this is really getting big! I'd like to thank you guys for your support in the comments, I really like hearing what you think about the story so far, and about your favorite parts, it really makes it worth it. So thank you! I know I don't answer to the comments, but I just really get so happy when I see them, and know that I love them, ok? Thank you!

I feel like the anime is soon going to make all of this sort of impossible to fit on the canon timeline, especially because it's Christmas while it seems like it's still summer in the anime, but I always thought of this as some sort of Alternative Universe that took all elements from canon and just altered some things here and there, like for example (very obviously), the fact that it's winter, and maybe some details that are just my personal headcanons for the characters (see if you spot anything in this chapter ;)

Another thing I want to make clear right now it's that updates might become slow after this, or chapters will be shorter, because I started the last term of my first semester in college this week, so I might need to take some time off of this to focus on that. I promise to not abandon it, though! And I might post some other works in the meantime because I really like where this is going and I just want to give you guys my best.

Enjoy!!!

Ryoken has no idea what the hell he's doing.

He not only never planned to have this meeting with Playmaker today, but he is also completely unaware and unsure of where the idea to work with him on researching SOL's projects and invite him to lunch came from. His

initial excuse, the one he does *not* tell Playmaker, is admittedly bit pathetic and he struggles to find a reasonable reason as to why he is doing this, besides the fact that he was getting restless on the boat. He didn't lie to Playmaker about scheduling issues making him unable to do this right after the holidays, not really, but it was certainly an excuse he was glad to have besides needing some fresh air that wasn't cold, salty, and wet.

Despite his love for the sea and the calm the waves brought him, the temperature around the winter was a *bit* too chilly for him to just stay put, and his companions were making him feel both agitated and claustrophobic; five people living together in a yacht for long periods of time was *not* fun, *especially* when four of them were men, and Ryoken guesses this could only be karma for trying to blow up the Internet. He was almost tempted to jump into the sea to drown himself by this point, so for the sake of his sanity, he needed a break from just about everything that came with being the leader of the Knights of Hanoi, to slip away from Spectre's troubled gaze, Kyoko's nervousness about her escape from the law, and Genome's rants that had all of them on edge. Aso was the only one that didn't look at him in a way that was drastically different from before the Tower of Hanoi, but Ryoken could hardly appreciate it when the situation with SOL and the Ignises became more dangerous every passing day and they did minimal progress in response, frustrating him even further.

Playmaker's accidental phone call had been the necessary evil Ryoken needed to finally get away from his Knights with a semblance of a reasonable excuse, thanks to the fact that it had been previously agreed that he would be the one handle Playmaker and his team, by himself, to avoid as much conflict as possible, in turn allowing him to be alone every time he needed to make contact with him in person. Perhaps very ironically, Playmaker ended up being Ryoken's temporary salvation for the day, and now he's just rolling with it for probably longer than he should be because he longed to not feel strangled by the very air he breathed, at least for a little while, and working with his rival – the easiest word, because really, what even *are* they at this point? – sounds like the best way to have a change of scenery and keep himself busy at the same time, giving him yet another excuse for his absence later. If asked, he would only say the bare minimum about his afternoon, because they could not find out about this

outing in any way or he would be relentlessly teased within an inch of his life. Spectre, in particular, could not find out about it; he was too intuitive and has a thing for this sort of destiny driven situations, and would probably welcome the distraction to his own dilemmas by annoying him until Ryoken pushed him off the boat or something like that.

On second thought, perhaps spending so much time with Playmaker isn't a good idea: one of them was bound to say something that would make the other lash out at some point but like always, Ryoken knew he brought this doom upon himself, so he might as well get whatever enjoyment he could out of this little lunch he had spontaneously invited Playmaker on before things got serious again, or the universe decided to remind them that this was definitely *not* normal for them, whatever happened first.

So far, the little cleaning robot had been amusing, but he couldn't help but quickly realize in the back of his mind, as soon as he stepped inside his home, that Playmaker – or rather, Yusaku – was a much more complicated individual outside of his Link VRAINS persona and his turbulent past than Ryoken gave him credit for, blindsided by their confrontations in the past and the ropes that tied their destiny together. Some things he knows because of the surveillance he ran once he found out that Fujiki Yusaku, victim number six, the one that got Ryoken so deeply involved in his father's mess, was Playmaker, Link VRAINS vigilante, though they liked to call him both hero and a criminal lately. He knows his address, his school, who he interacted with on a superficial level, his grades, and more relevant to the present, that he's had one of those cleaning robots in his possession for a few years now, this particular model now regarded as old if not ancient despite its incredible helpfulness and durability, but Ryoken never considered that Playmaker treated it as anything *but* an assistant, letting it make use of his TV, and having him wonder if perhaps the Dark Ignis messed with its programming in some way to even make that possible in the first place.

What he wasn't expecting were the simple and mundane things, like his apartment smelling noticeably of cleaning products, his uniform tie lying abandoned right beside a worn-looking coat on the couch instead of being on the coat rack by the door with his jacket, the carelessness to the way in

which the furniture was arranged around the TV, the almost empty bedroom, and the laptop that was as ancient as his Duel Disk, something he also knew he had, but helped paint a clear picture: Fujiki Yusaku was the perfect example of what a vaguely mature and responsible teenager would look like if they lived by themselves, what with forgetting about having lunch and misplacing the Ignis, *somehow*, despite how annoying it was, and not bothering to decorate the place with any Christmas ornaments apart from a miniature tree that looked brand new on the kitchen counter that, if Ryoken *had* to guess, he was probably harassed into buying by someone else. He did not know why this was so interesting to him when he first arrived, going as far as to ask if this was normal for him, or at least he *pretended to have no idea*—

Halting his thought process to avoid any revelations, Ryoken decides that it's best to just go eat instead of wondering and giving himself ideas about Fujiki Yusaku's private life like he has any right to do so, not eager to come across something he won't like about it.

“Ready to go?” He asks, watching Playmaker fit his shoes in and wrap himself in the same light brown jacket and white scarf from earlier. The blue sweater he's wearing must be barely thin enough to keep him safe from the cold, so it's no wonder he covers himself in his scarf up to his ears, and Ryoken barely has to guess that the heater in this sad excuse of a building must be damaged to know it's the main reason he's even this cold.

Playmaker nods, grabbing his keys and phone and stuffing his hands in his pockets. He didn't seem to have any gloves. “Lead the way.”

Ryoken pulls on the door a bit hesitantly, remembering how Playmaker had slammed it closed, but it opens easily and the cold winter air doesn't hit him strongly at all; the inside of Playmaker's apartment is barely any warmer than the outside, and Ryoken politely waits for him to lock his door after hearing him ordering the cleaning robot to not do anything crazy while he was out, simply because he was raised with manners. Otherwise, Ryoken would have probably already locked himself in his car with the heating on. He ought to help him file a complaint to his landlord out of sheer pettiness and basic decency, really because Playmaker shivers almost violently, and his frame looks so delicate that he could be easily blown away by the wind,

the thought making Ryoken feel just a bit uncomfortable with himself; he *really* shouldn't be thinking about his rival so thoroughly, especially when he is right in front of him.

He opens the passenger seat door of his car for Playmaker once they step onto the sidewalk, earning a weird look for his trouble, but there's nothing about this whole thing – talking on the phone, visiting his home, going to eat out for lunch, working together to uncover the secrets of a mega-corporation – that isn't weird already, so he only raises an eyebrow in response, letting him think whatever what he wanted but trying to avoid purposely making him uncomfortable. He closes the passenger-side door for him as well, and as Ryoken walks around the front of the car to get into the driver's seat, he thinks about how Playmaker looks so awkward outside of his VR avatar, how he has a strange way of appearing both uncomfortable and confident when he's speaking about anything that isn't related to the Ignises or SOL, or the Lost Incident, and the last thing Ryoken wants right now is to patronize him or put him on the spot. It was clear to him that outings like this weren't exactly normal for Playmaker, judging by the tense line of his shoulders as he leans back on his seat, and Ryoken never imagined that his bluntness carried over so perfectly from Link VRAINS but managed to make his lack of social skills so clear at the same time.

It wasn't that obvious, really, Ryoken is just observant, but Playmaker gives off a much more introverted aura outside of Link VRAINS, which was reasonable: people created avatars and fake identities online all the time to appear like the better version of themselves, not that Ryoken could fully relate – Revolver is hardly the best of him, and sometimes he wonders if he's even the bad at all, or if he exists in such a grey area inside his own brain it's impossible to categorize him – but what he does know is the appeal of being able to act without having your own insecurities get in the way. Playmaker and Fujiki Yusaku were similar in many, many ways, otherwise, Ryoken wouldn't find him as interesting as he does, but he has to live through the problems that Playmaker looks to solve, essentially two faces of the same coin. On paper, Fujiki Yusaku is not remarkable – average grades, no family, barely any friends – but in reality probably has more backbone than anyone else Ryoken has ever known.

What happened to not thinking about him so thoroughly, uh? A voice points out inside his head, sounding way too much like Spectre, and he can almost picture a smug grin alongside it, so Ryoken turns towards Playmaker instead of letting his thoughts distract him, not ready to give up his sanity – *the thing that was looking to stabilize on the first place* – and watches him glance around the car and shift in his seat. Definitely awkward, but he wore it well at least, and he was not outright uncomfortable. Good.

“What do you have in mind for lunch?” Ryoken asks, going over their possibilities himself; nothing too fancy, but delicious and fulfilling, with the right amount of nutrients. When he’s met with only silence, he looks at Playmaker to find him staring ahead, head tilted in thought. “Any preferences?”

“I don’t know, I eat just about anything,” he admits, turning his head towards him and shrugging. He looks quite uninterested but very aware at the same time, somehow. “Just go with whatever you want.”

“Very well,” Ryoken starts the car, heading downtown. He has just the right restaurant in mind, though it may be a little busy at this time of the day considering it’s the holidays, but they’ll manage just fine. If he has to persuade a waiter, so be it. “You’re okay with restaurants?”

“I don’t know,” Playmaker’s expression pinches a bit, and he blinks as if an answer will suddenly come to him. “Do you always eat in restaurants?”

“Not all the time; fast food delivery is more efficient when you live on a boat,” Ryoken says, trying to appear casual, and fixing his eyes on the road. He pretends to not hear the tapping of Playmakers fingers against his own knee or how he keeps rubbing his hands together. “I also actually enjoy Café Nagi’s hotdogs, though you could use more publicity— Yelp reviews will only get you so far.”

He turns on the heater while he talks, and Playmaker melts into his seat like a puddle, though he tries to be subtle about it. Ryoken likes the cold just because it’s far more bearable than the heat for him, and allows him to dress in blazers without sweating buckets, but it’s clear that this is not the case for Playmaker. He has seen the medical records, of course, knows about how

every single one of the victims of the Lost Incident are far more delicate than the average person, that their immune systems, unless treated, probably wouldn't be able to get them through a strong cold or fever without complications, and that's without considering the constant fatigue. Playmaker was no exception to that and it was noticeable, if Ryoken looked closely, that he never bothered to get any serious treatment beyond what was offered to him until he filled for minor emancipation and stopped attending therapy. He didn't know if he was still on the anti-depressants or if his quest for revenge had given him the will to ignore all of his problems to focus on that, because Fujiki Yusaku's medical records were outdated by years, but physically, despite still having the roundness of youth on his features, he was looking a bit too thin, a bit too tired for a sixteen-year-old teenager. Despite the careful study he's made of his health, and that of the rest of the victims, Ryoken knows he's no one to be worrying about Playmaker's wellbeing after all the troubles he's brought to him, no matter how unintentional or unmeasured, and he can't decide if worrying like that would make all he's done and enabled better or worse.

"I thought you only bought them because you wanted to watch us closely," Playmaker comments, shoulders dropping completely, and Ryoken takes his eyes away from him before he makes them crash. It's unlikely, but his behavior has been unacceptable today, so he should try to at least pretend he's in control of the situation. "Also, publicity is expensive. Ai can turn into a drone and fly around on a slow day."

"Initially, I was just observing you, but I came to actually enjoy them," Ryoken explains, and it feels a bit alien. This is probably the most normal conversation they've had since—ever, really, while also managing to put his stalkerish tendencies on the spotlight more than he'd like. "I noticed you're working the grill now. Does your school allow it?"

"No," Playmaker immediately responds, and Ryoken risks a glance to see his ears turning pink. "But they'll never know, and I don't really care. Besides, I actually get paid now, so."

"You didn't before?"

“I hardly worked there before. I just had a lot of free time after...” He trails off, and Ryoken only nods, humming. He knows Playmaker means the Tower, and those three months of relative peace—for him, at least. Ryoken was planning a jailbreak during a good part of those three months, after all. He finds himself unnecessarily hoping that Playmaker actually relaxed in that time, but he knows for a fact he most likely did; Playmaker sightings weren’t a thing on the new Link VRAINS until Kusanagi Jin’s conscience got kidnapped, and he’s glad he probably got to enjoy three normal months before he dived headfirst into the crazy again.

The conversation naturally dies down after that, and the rest of the car ride is actually pretty quiet, more than what’s Ryoken is used to, but he’s fine with that. Playmaker clearly isn’t uncomfortable with the companionable silence they have going on, and this is exactly what he was looking for, a bit of peace that didn’t feel on the edge of turning into chaos. He knows it’s mostly superficial; a stolen afternoon that just so happens to be on Christmas is hardly going to have a lasting effect on his overall mood, but it’s the best he’s felt in weeks after the Light Ignis movements and SOL’s plans seemed to have gone almost completely underground and become a pain to trace. He is lucky to have an inside man in SOL, he thinks, or they would all probably be even more lost than they already sort of are, and then slowly shakes his head, trying to get his thoughts off that subject. He is going to enjoy himself, to forget about what’s been on his mind for months, so it’s not the time to let his mind wander off, and considering he’s dragging Playmaker, who’s staring out the window like he has never seen the city before, to his mess, Ryoken might as well make sure he’s enjoying himself as well.

The place they’ll be eating at is a small Japanese restaurant that stuck to a traditional menu, but was pretty western when it came to their style, located inside a medium-sized mall that’s quite famous for their Link VRAINS merchandise stores, so the place is packed with crowds of people and they have to dive right in as soon as they get inside, after thankfully being able to secure a spot to park the car in that isn’t that far away from the doors. There are Christmas decorations everywhere, and, knowing how merciless people could be, he’s careful to avoid the mistletoe and the avid last hour gift shoppers and families going around having their

own celebrations. The conversations are almost startlingly loud after such a quiet car ride, but he adjusts quickly to it and superficially relaxes. He once was part of such crowds of wide-eyed children and exasperated families chasing after them, but Ryoken stopped enjoying Christmas so blissfully somewhere in between SOL infecting his father with a lethal virus and focusing on his mission to eliminate the Ignises. He isn't quite sure as of when because it hardly matters, but he does hold some affection for the holiday still and he used to have small celebrations with his Knights not that long ago, so he firmly believes that what he said about holidays not being a time to be alone. He especially thinks this over as he watches Playmaker, out of the corner of his eye, stick to his side as casually as he can while scanning the crowd, and shaking off the nostalgia, Ryoken looks away to do the same in what could be shared paranoia about being watched or followed, or perhaps in Playmaker's case, apprehension about the massive amounts of people around, or at the idea of being recognized.

Soon enough, it seems like he guessed right.

“Fujiki-kun!” Someone screams, and Playmaker’s face shifts from neutral to annoyed for a couple of seconds before going back to neutral with a displeased narrowing of his eyes as an undertone. He stops, letting out a sigh and turning, and Ryoken halts his steps as well, curious. A short, green-haired teenager that looks vaguely familiar, though he can’t tell from where, approaches them, covered in festive clothing from head to toe and clutching a bag from one of the dozens of Link VRAINS merch stores. He thinks he sees a poster of Playmaker inside, and the real Playmaker notices, because he stiffens visibly, narrowing his eyes further in a passive-aggressive glare. The guy doesn’t notice and beams up at him, completely ignoring Ryoken’s presence. “Fujiki-kun! I was not expecting to see you here! No offense, but you don’t look like someone who’s very festive!”

Playmaker barely blinks. “I’m not,” he glances down at the bag, a disturbed look in his eye. “What are you doing?”

The boy grins. “Christmas shopping, of course!” He pulls out a Blue Angel plushie from his bag, shoving it in Playmaker’s face. “Do you think that Zaizen will like this? I got it for her.”

Ryoken struggles to not at least chuckle, letting his lips twist in an aborted grin, and even Playmaker looks a bit shaken by the idea of Zaizen Aoi receiving a plushie of herself as a Christmas gift. He sounds almost bewildered when he speaks, and Ryoken hides his smile on his scarf. “I have no idea, Shima. I barely know her.”

“Well, it’s not my fault you can’t make friends,” Shima deflates like a balloon, pouting, and his eyes finally shift to Ryoken, acknowledging his existence. They light up, and he smiles again, eyes moving back and forth between him and Playmaker. Ryoken has a bad feeling about this kid, and he’s quickly finding him hilariously annoying; this might just be that Brave MAX guy Aso kidnapped that one time because he opened his big mouth, just like he’s doing now. “Eh, Fujiki, did you finally managed to make a friend?”

He snickers, trying to wink, and Playmaker looks a bit pained. Ryoken is suddenly very intrigued about what kind of life Fujiki Yusaku lives outside of Link VRAINS, forget any of his previous holdups. This could be interesting, and he ignores the little voice in his head telling him he’s getting way too attached, way too quickly.

Shima continues, “I have to say, I’ve never seen this guy around the school, but I guess he must be quite someone for you to be giving him the time, eh?”

Playmaker looks at Ryoken, gaze heavy with something that disappears quickly under the presence of his classmate, but it feels familiar for him. It makes him think about his face during their last duel at the top of the Tower, but he squashes that down. It’s not the time.

“I guess he is,” Playmaker agrees, looking back at Shima, who raises his eyebrows like he can’t believe he just said that. Ryoken is just a bit shocked himself, but he hides it effortlessly as Playmaker continues. “He’s not a student, though.”

Ryoken decides he’s had enough of observing. “I’m in college, actually,” he shrugs, and Shima seems to recoil back a bit in shock. How *interesting*.

Does Playmaker *really* only hangouts with Soulburner and Kusanagi Shoichi outside of school, then, like his surveillance suggested?

Playmaker looks a bit surprised by his comment, probably thinking he's lying, and Ryoken kind of is; he dropped out of his online classes shortly after the Dark Ignis got captured by Playmaker, realizing he would be pretty busy after a five years search coming to a head, and he only took two of them up again as a hobby during the months they were planning Hanoi's comeback and Kyoko's jailbreak. He isn't planning to continue with them until everything is over for good or he finds another dull in time to fit them in, but it's hardly important for him right now.

"Wow, Fujiki-kun, how did you manage to befriend a college student?" Shima probes, apparently not taking the hint to leave the subject alone through Playmaker's dry expression. He's really good at looking like an uninterested teenager that probably has no idea what the latest internet trends are. "I'll have to take my words back about you not making friends!"

"It just sort of happened." He shrugs, glancing at Ryoken again, and he makes sure to return the look before he speaks.

"Yusaku doesn't like to talk about how we met," Ryoken offers, the name rolling off his tongue with more ease than it should, even after all those years of it echoing in his head, simultaneously filling him with guilt and determination. It's almost relieving to be finally saying it out loud so casually like it doesn't have a thousand connotations behind it, and he lets out a sigh and flashes a playful smile after a brief pause, trying to keep Shima distracted. "It's embarrassing for him."

"What are you—?" Playmaker whispers, only for Ryoken to hear, but Shima talks over him, and quite loudly at that.

"Oh, that sounds interesting!" He exclaims, waving his arms around. This kid really acted like he has no self-awareness, and was apparently immune to Playmaker's glare, not that it was being directed at him as of right now; Ryoken was sure he was going to burn a hole through his cheek. "Tell me about it! Fujiki never shares anything with the rest of the Dueling Club."

Ryoken glances at Playmaker with an arched eyebrow. Did he seriously sign up for the Dueling Club? How did that work out for his secret identity at all? On a whim, he guessed he used a dummy deck outside of VRAINS, which was both clever, cute, and perhaps risky in a way, that he insisted on having a deck instead of just pretending he didn't know a damn thing and wasn't interested, and as much as Ryoken would like to know more about Playmaker's school life, he was getting fed up with this kid's questioning, and time was precious, so it was time to leave.

"Sorry, I guess another time—Yusaku and I are in a hurry right now, we have some important things to do," Ryoken shoots him his most charming smile, making sure the sharpness of his features doesn't make it look as hostile as he feels, and Shima stares, mouth dropping open. "See you later, I guess. Let's go, Yusaku."

Playmaker is also staring at him, though a bit less intrusively than Shima is, and Ryoken lightly grabs his elbow to turn him and lead him to the restaurant, walking away a bit more quickly than it's polite, but if this interaction proves anything, is that Shima didn't understand what body language was: Playmaker was stiff as a board under his hand and he still looked vaguely annoyed, so he guessed he wouldn't notice Ryoken's attempt to blend with the crowd at all as well.

"I have to admit, Playmaker," Ryoken starts, feeling a teasing smile take over his lips. "You have interesting friends."

"Shima is not my friend," he says, frowning, tone a bit grumpy and two steps away from pouting, which is also cute, so Ryoken just shoots him another smile. Looking down for a moment, Playmaker seems to be suddenly conflicted and hesitates before talking, a barely noticeable twitch of his mouth that Ryoken wouldn't have seen if he hasn't been looking. "You shouldn't call me that in public, either. You already used my name, so you might as well stick to it."

"As you wish, Yusaku," Ryoken says, letting his grin fade and forcing his face to remain neutral as he glances down at him, taking in the downturned corners of his lips and his eyes jumping from storefront to storefront, most likely trying to guess where Ryoken is taking him and using it as distraction

from his hang-ups about Ryoken using his name so freely so suddenly. He makes a decision at that moment, and he hopes he won't regret it, but he probably will at some point, like he frequently does. "You should call me by my name as well. We're not in our avatars right now."

Yusaku's head turns to looks at his face, but Ryoken just stares up ahead, finally spotting the restaurant. He doesn't want to deal with the complices of their relationship; there would be time for that someday, but right now he's absolutely starving, and he can smell the traditional Japanese food from the outside already, making his mouth water appreciatively. It's not really a Christmas meal, but it's much, much better than take out or cup ramen or Café Nagi hotdogs, so he's sure Playmaker will appreciate it.

"We're here," Ryoken says, walking up to the restaurant, and Yusaku seems to snap himself from his thoughts, turning to look at the place. He lets out a nondescript sound from his throat and looks pleasantly surprised, eyes looking through the glass storefront that let them see the movement inside, and most importantly, the food that was carried to each table. It was a cozy place, with wood floors and lots of light to make for a nice atmosphere, the staff always friendly and the food amazing, so Ryoken was glad it wasn't full because he really likes this particular restaurant.

"Seems nice," Playmaker mumbles, blinking, eyes bright. He looks as hungry as Ryoken is. "Smells amazing."

Ryoken tries not to look way too pleased with himself, hiding his grin on the collar on his coat, but it's all he can do to stop himself from being visibly smug about it, and Playmaker is too transfixed by the place to notice. He can't help but feel like this will be a very interesting evening. "Glad you like it. Come on, I'm starving."

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(Here's the thing, Naoki really likes Fujiki. He thinks he's just a shy guy, that maybe is a bit lonely and doesn't really know how to interact with people, so he is very surprised about him having a *college* friend. There was something about the two of them that struck him as odd but not necessarily in a bad way, and he couldn't help but wonder exactly how someone that looked so charismatic ended up being friends with a loner like Fujiki.

Perhaps he should ask Zaizen-chan about it. Or maybe the hotdog truck guy...?

Anyhow, he hoped Fujiki hasn't noticed the Playmaker poster, because he was planning on giving it to him as a gift, and if he didn't want it, then that's fine. Just another one for his personal collection, then!)

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you guys for reading! Hope you liked Ryoken's POV - I feel like he has a bit of constant guilt over what happened and that's part of the reason why he wants to distance himself from Yusaku. After all, as far as we know, his father either used him as bait to get Yusaku to get closer to him so he could kidnap him, or he just straight up kidnapped his son's new friend (which, father of the year award I guess? not cool). And that's a big reason to be so worried over Yusaku in general - and all the Lost Children, really - while still being so cold and single-minded. It seems like he might be coming to some sort of breakthrough about it in the anime though, and I'm really excited to see what becomes of him (and everyone, really!) over the next few episodes. The summaries are very interesting!!

I'm sorry if the notes are too long today, it's just that I had a lot to say about this chapter, and I really wanted to thank you guys for the support. I really appreciate it, because I'm having a lot of fun.

See you next week, hopefully!

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

Oh, man! It's been so long! I didn't expect to take this long to make another update, but I decided that finishing up my exams and getting some good sleep would probably be for the best, so I'm sorry for the wait. I enjoyed writing this chapter a lot because there's more dialogue, so I hope you like it! Fun fact: this chapter went a bit differently in the middle when I first wrote it, but I'm much more happy with how it turned out now! Anyways, I've kept you guys waiting for long enough, so please enjoy. Thanks again for all the lovely comments, it really makes this experience a lot more fun!

Ryoken concludes that Yusaku knows nothing about Japanese restaurant etiquette the moment they walk through the door and the hostess approaches them to lead them to their table. Credit where is due, Yusaku almost succeeds in hiding it by following Ryoken's movements if it weren't for him noticing the wide-eyed and overwhelmed look in his eyes, and the slight hesitation to his steps. He really meant it when he said he didn't know if he was alright with eating in restaurants, and Ryoken almost wants to scold himself for not assuming that he wasn't used to that environment when it should have been very clear by his answer on their trip there.

Because of this, he's thankful that they're not at an overly formal place, and that the restaurant actually only offers western style seating, but the knowledge of Yusaku's lack of confidence with this setting only makes Ryoken equal amounts of amused and worried, resulting in him wondering if Yusaku has ever enjoyed a proper home-cooked meal ever since the incident. Ryoken guesses he hasn't, and again he frowns at the idea of Yusaku only eating hotdogs and take-out to survive.

He sees Yusaku glancing at him curiously as they sit, noticing his troubled expression, and Ryoken holds all of those thoughts and puts them in a box inside his head, trying to keep himself in line, not willing to let them run wild again. He came here to have a bit of peace and enjoy a nice lunch with

his non-enemy, so he might as well stay faithful to that idea, and he was sure it would do Yusaku well to relax too; Ryoken was sure he was just as stressed as he was about the Light Ignis's war and SOL chasing them like dogs, if the faint shadows under his eyes were anything to go by, so he tried to relax his face as much as he could to not appear tense, focusing instead on a simple fact: This afternoon, this place, might just be a start for Yusaku to learn about things he missed from his childhood in between the trauma and the therapy, and that he may even learn to enjoy later, so Ryoken decides to grab the menus off of the waitress's hands, not letting Yusaku have a look, and proceeds to order close to an unreasonable amount of food for them to share. He looks vaguely uncomfortable about this, but if he's truly bothered he doesn't show it, choosing to stay quiet instead, probably distinctly aware that Ryoken has more experience in this environment than he does.

The restaurant provides them with wet towels to clean their hands, and Ryoken deliberately makes his movements slow so Yusaku can follow without any problem, cleaning his hands carefully and folding it once he's done, leaving it off to the side where it won't be a bother for them.

"Have you ever done something like this before?" Ryoken asks, breaking the ice, pretending to not notice his fidgeting. Yusaku is holding the towel in his hand a bit more aggressively than he needs to clean his hands, but the question seems to startle him out of the mood he's in, and he finally folds it and sets it to the side, just like Ryoken did.

"Not really, no," he hesitates, looking off to the side almost a bit sheepishly, "not the restaurant, or the Christmas lunch, or the eating with my— um."

At his stumble, Ryoken allows himself a grin, watching Yusaku's ears flush lightly. He's really pale, either from not going outside or not having proper rest, allowing that to be easily noticeable; he probably could use some heat as well because of how cold his apartment was, and so it's a good thing Ryoken ordered soup. He finds that Yusaku is a lot easier to get different reactions out of than Playmaker has ever been: it almost seemed that in his avatar, he was immune to many things and intense about others, but those extremes met perfectly in real life, emotions a bit more muted, more like calming ocean waves than the tsunami Playmaker could be, or perhaps a

spring breeze and a tornado would be more accurate, considering how he liked his Data Storms. Fujiki Yusaku is just as passionate, but unless one is looking for it – *and oh, is Ryoken looking* – it’s probably easy to miss, so is no wonder that he seems to have a reputation as a loner at school; his classmates probably don’t understand his social cues at all, because they’re so small, and it’s most likely that Yusaku doesn’t try to change that, and even prefers it that way.

He could have some fun with this, not out of sadistic satisfaction, but out of a need to make him feel comfortable by trying to be more casual; he can only imagine what Yusaku’s perception of Ryoken amounts to outside of being his “special person” and the leader of a cyber-terrorist organization, as well as repeatedly trying to ruin his partnership with the Dark Ignis. It’s really not the best resume if he says so himself.

“Our relationship status is certainly complicated,” Ryoken concedes, and a waitress approaches them to offer them some water, leaving a full jar on the table and filling their glasses at their nods, though Ryoken continues through all of that, “there’s no need to label it yet.”

The waitress visibly blinks, intrigued by his words and side-eyeing them both, staring at Ryoken a bit more intrusively than what’s appropriate, and Yusaku’s flush increases as he glares at him, understanding what his intention with that comment, starting to shake his head subtly. He decides to be nice, if only for a moment, and turns towards the waitress as she straightens back up.

“That would be all for now, gentlemen?” She asks, addressing them both but looking right at Ryoken, a brilliant smile on her lips. He starts to nod and then hesitates before deciding to order some drinks for them.

“Perhaps you could get us some hot tea? Whatever you have it’s fine,” Ryoken requests, and then smiles politely at her before looking at Yusaku. “You’re alright with that?”

“Sure,” he says, carefully, like he’s suspicious of Ryoken’s intentions, but his only answer is to ignore it and smile at the waitress again. Tea would be

perfect for getting some heat into their bones, considering how unrelenting this winter has been.

“That would be all, thank you.”

“No problem at all, sir!” She says, staring at Ryoken for another second before abruptly turning to go off and look for their drinks. Yusaku is on him immediately.

“Do you always have to be like this?” There’s a bit of an anxious undertone to his words, making them fall a bit flat and non-threatening, but there’s certainly some aggression in there as well. Ryoken struggles not to chuckle at it, being reminded of the way someone would deal with a particularly stubborn cat.

“Like what? I was just ordering some drinks for us from that very kind waitress,” he feigns innocence. Yusaku seems to bristle a little at that, glaring at Ryoken, so he lets his smirk slip in, arching his eyebrows in surprised amusement, only to point out: “You’re too easy to rile up sometimes.”

“You just keep acting like this is normal,” Yusaku retorts, and Ryoken occupies himself with pushing one glass of water in his direction. He doesn’t want to talk about what this is right now, and preferably never. Yusaku narrows his eyebrows, but he looks more like he’s trying to solve a puzzle than worried or angry about Ryoken’s attitude, which he actually has a reason to be. “It’s jarring.”

“You don’t like it? Because I can stop, if that’s what you want,” Ryoken offers, shrugging, and pushes the water glass on his direction again. He tries to ignore the slight disappointment the idea brings, distracting himself by tapping on the water glass three times and saying “Drink, you look like death warmed over.”

Yusaku takes the glass carefully, as if he may break it, and shakes his head. “No, I don’t mean it like that—I’m just used to talking to you under very different circumstances,” he takes a sip, and makes eye contact as he sets the glass down on the table. They look really bright, for a reason Ryoken

can't pinpoint, and he wonders if he's just hallucinating it. "It's actually pretty nice to remember you're a person too, not just an avatar, or my tentative rival."

"You're saying that I'm shattering your expectations, then?" Ryoken tilts his head to the side and leans his arms on the table, propping his chin up in his hand, wanting to give this conversation his full attention and allowing his lips to curl up, watching Yusaku from under his eyelashes. "Is that good or bad?"

Perhaps I'm laying this casual thing on too thick, he thinks, but immediately discards the idea. If anything, this attempt at banter would keep both of them distracted from their respective duties, and Yusaku doesn't seem to find Ryoken's efforts to ignore any serious topics that insulting. There are some things he can't ignore, of course, but he thinks they get each other in a way, at least for now.

"I just told you it's a good thing," Yusaku says, cheeks flushing, and his lips twitch up in an aborted grin at Ryoken's shameless demeanor, which he thinks it's a shame. "Pay attention to what you're being told, *Ryoken*."

"I am, *Yusaku*," he nods, quite liking the way Yusaku's voice wraps around his name and trying to put as much meaning into saying his as he can. They sound a lot better than Revolver and Playmaker ever did, and there's a different feeling behind it as well for both of them. Ryoken stares at him with intensity as he says it, Yusaku staring back as he takes a few long sips from his water, and then, just to break the resulting tension, gives him a playful look, eyebrows arched. "You have to understand, it's not easy to focus on the company of the most looked after bachelor of Link VRAINS."

Yusaku chokes.

"Wh— what are you even *talking* about?" He coughs out, setting his glass down again, and while Ryoken is glad he doesn't seem to be dying and that he didn't drop it to the ground, he's also really entertained by that reaction. Yusaku's face is *flaming*, and the resulting grin taking over Ryoken's lips makes him talk again, a bit more heatedly "That's not even *me*, that's—"

“Your avatar, yes,” he interrupts, mindful of the fact that they’re in public. His joke was pretty risky already, but it doesn’t stop him from continuing, saying only what sounds like half lies to his ears, and that’s being generous. He sighs dramatically, leaning in like he’s going to tell him a secret, making his voice a hushed whisper. “But Fujiki Yusaku is also quite striking, don’t you think? And intriguing as well, he’s on the *Dueling Club* and he doesn’t even *attend* the meetings—”

“You’re ridiculous,” Yusaku shakes his head, and Ryoken winks at him, again enjoying how much his own embarrassment makes him fidget in his chair. Yusaku glares in response, and then: “How do you know I don’t go to the meetings?”

Ryoken shrugs. “You’re always on Café Nagi during your free time.”

“Are you stalking me?” He accuses, and Ryoken’s instinct is to say no, to deny everything, but then he thinks about just how many hours he’s spent looking at public cameras footage and recordings of some of his classes and hesitates, as well as all the medical records and grades and hides a sigh by taking a sip from his water glass. There was something extremely uncomfortable about admitting to doing what certainly counts as stalking, try as he might justify it with his cause against the Ignises.

“Are you uncomfortable with it?” He asks instead, and Yusaku frowns.

“That’s... not an answer to my question,” he points out, and Ryoken looks away momentarily for a few long seconds and then makes eye contact with him, shrugging nonchalantly.

“You don’t have to worry about it, all my information on you is encrypted,” Ryoken concedes, not wanting to outright lie to him to his face. He has information on all the Lost Children, but Yusaku’s folder is by far the one with the most amount on it because of their personal connections, both in and out of VRAINS, and only Ryoken has unlimited access to them, because he’s the only one, as far as he knows, bothering to keep up with all of the victims. “I’m the only one with any access.”

“You—”

Whatever Yusaku was about to say gets interrupted by the waitress returning with their tea, and both of them lean away from the table to let her put the cups down without trouble. She smiles kindly at them both and then, probably thinking that neither of them would notice, slips a piece of folded paper underneath Ryoken's cup, only to retreat once everything is in its place.

“What’s that?” Yusaku asks, grabbing his cup to take a tentative sip of his tea, humming pleasantly at it before setting it back down. He sounds innocently curious, and Ryoken shakes his head, trying to fight off an embarrassed smile. He knows exactly what it is.

He unfolds the paper, sees the number, and then sets it back down underneath his cup, hiding it well so the poor girl wouldn’t have to deal with it right away. He wouldn’t be interested even if he wasn’t so busy, anyway.

“It’s her phone number,” he shrugs, and Yusaku’s shoulders drop, suddenly frowning in what looks like confusion, but whether it is towards the waitress giving him her number or something else, he can’t tell.

“Oh,” he says, takes another sip of his tea, and Ryoken grabs his own cup, not wanting it to get cold. “Does this happen to you often?”

“Often enough, I suppose,” Ryoken admits, blowing a bit before taking a sip. It’s mint flavored, and it has almost as much sugar in it as he usually likes, so he reaches for a sugar pack to add it in, Yusaku’s eyes following the motion. “Why, have you never seen something like that happen?”

“Only on TV,” Yusaku shakes his head, looking conflicted over something, “I didn’t know that servers actually did that. I thought it was mostly fiction.”

“Only the brave ones do it. It’s hardly important, though,” Ryoken shoots him a small smile, and then, despite his unease about the subject, he asks, “What were we talking about?”

“About you potentially stalking me,” Yusaku responds immediately, without hesitation, and then frowns again. “Just how often do you do something like that?”

“Only when I need your location,” a half lie; Ryoken tended to watch him during his shifts at Café Nagi simply because he was bored, and watching Yusaku interact with other people from afar was completely different from actually talking to him. He wondered if half of the clients of Café Nagi ever felt like Yusaku’s gaze was too intense for his apparent slacker reputation. “I assure you, I’m not doing anything with that information that you should be worried about. We have files for everyone related to the incident anyways.”

“Is there anything you don’t know about me, then? Because you have been acting like you’ve known me for a while,” Yusaku wonders, but not unkindly. He’s already left it clear that he doesn’t mind Ryoken being so friendly with him in a way that doesn’t have an ulterior motive, or as a backhanded compliment as he tends to do during their usual encounters. It’s... surprising, if not downright upsetting, to realize how relieved he is by this, how serious Yusaku is about befriending someone who was, until not that long ago, making his life harder, and that was going to keep doing so after the Light Ignis was defeated. He thinks over his words for a few seconds, and then admits:

“There are plenty things I don’t know about you, Yusaku. Words on a page aren’t everything, and my knowledge of facts doesn’t equal knowing you personally,” Ryoken clears his throat, trying to not fidget too noticeably as Yusaku’s eyes widen slightly in a realization of what he means. “I can’t say I’m not... curious about your daily life, but I hardly have the right to ask for more when our affairs aren’t sorted and dealt with yet.”

“So you *are* listening to me whatever we talk about that,” Yusaku contemplates, wonder in his voice, and then looks down at his tea, a pleased look on his face. Ryoken swallows, feeling his own anxiety and insecurities making him feel like a weight just dropped on his stomach, but he thinks he understands or at least is starting to understand, and perhaps even respect, some of Yusaku’s points about looking forward to a new future and finding

his own path. But he can't commit to it yet, and he finds himself feeling grateful for Yusaku's patience.

Looking up from his cup, Yusaku stares at him for a few seconds, and Ryoken unconsciously taps his fingers on the table again, then takes a sip from his tea. Finally, he talks: "You really think you don't 'have the right' to get to know me better?"

Ryoken winces visibly, because Yusaku unsurprisingly manages to hit a low point, and he can only shrug to aid his defense. "Well, I *have* tried to ruin your life in multiple occasions. A normal person would think that you'd need some time to really decide whether you still want someone like that in your life."

"Ryoken, I was on therapy for years," Yusaku starts, voice tight and downright *annoyed* but expression mild, and Ryoken stares a bit incredulously at him as he continues. "I stopped going a few years ago because my own obsession thwarted my progress so I didn't see it as effective, but I like to at least think that a lot has changed since, and that I finally have a grasp on my feelings. Our confrontation at the Tower and the months following have helped me get a clear image of what I want and what I don't want, even if I'm still quite neglectful of my needs sometimes. That being said, there *shouldn't* be any doubt in your head about me wanting you in my life."

"That's... I'll admit you have a point, but you know my reasons very well," Ryoken can't help but frown, and he feels like there's an argument coming from this; he's surprised it's not directly related to the Ignises, considering that's their number one difference. "And just because you want it, it doesn't mean it will become a reality— sorry, but I'm trying to be realistic here."

"You're trying to be realistic with your current mindset, but sometimes our expectations aren't met as we expected them to be," he points out, staying calm despite Ryoken's sort of insensitive comment. "We don't know what will happen during our showdown with Lighting, or even after it... we don't know what SOL will do, and if that will make us work together closely for long periods of time, and that instantly creates a scenario in which we won't be able to avoid being around each other."

“That’s a lot of ‘if’s, though. And you don’t know if my mindset will ever change, or if it will be proven wrong at all.” Ryoken clenches his jaw, but he’s not pissed at Yusaku. He’s just... frustrated, baffled, a bit worried about the future, if they will even get to live another day after whatever happens happens, but he *has* to, if only to fulfill his father’s objective. “For all we know, I could be your next immediate enemy after we defeat the Light Ignis.”

“I don’t *know*, but I’m *hoping*, and perhaps you need to start hoping yourself, instead of letting yourself be consumed by a task that has shaped your life in as many ways as it has mine,” he says, and gives him this look, as he takes another sip of his tea, intense and smoldering in a way, that makes Ryoken feel trapped, entranced, and he finally – fully, mind you, he already had an idea – understands why there are so many people on the Internet claiming that Playmaker has the most beautiful, intense eyes to ever exist, but his words still hit pretty hard, and he almost feels like they’re back on top of the Tower, a feeling he does not welcome in any way. Yusaku blinks, sighs, and then looks down at his cup again. “I hate to say it so bluntly, but it’s just how I work, so... You wouldn’t be the first person to lose yourself in an almost impossible, draining, and prejudicing task like this, and I don’t want you to just become a footnote in a history book ten or twenty years from now.”

Ryoken tries very hard not to feel insulted or ashamed by the implications of Yusaku’s words, that his wish to fulfil the mission his father laid upon him will drive him to unspeakable extremes like it did to him, like it did to Go Onizuka, as it did to his Knights, who are haunted enough by the actions of their past, each in a different way, to follow him into oblivion, to support him through plans to suicide bomb the Internet and take thousands of people with him. He knows that Yusaku is right, but he’s just... not ready to accept it. Perhaps later, when the Light Ignis is dealt with, he will seriously think about it, consider coming to a tentative truce with the Ignises, but by this point, he firmly believes the world would be better off without their existence and the threat they represent. He’s aware that Yusaku understands this and that he will not force Ryoken into anything he doesn’t want to participate in and that he won’t try to convince him in backhanded ways to drop his goals. This very conversation proves that he’s, perhaps a bit

unexpectedly, worried about what this mission will do to him in the long run, having all the right to warn him after having gone through something similar that was, in fact, consuming his life as well.

Clearing his throat, Ryoken glances at the way Yusaku delicately hold his cup to his lips, and while he doesn't necessarily need to come to a decision right on this moment, or to make further promises, he can't help but say, in the most serious voice he can channel his intentions through: "I'll keep it in mind."

Yusaku stares at him, opens his mouth—

"Alright, gentlemen—" a voice interrupts, and they both snap their heads at their waitress, who flinches back at the strength of their combined gaze, having taken them both by surprise. She smiles nervously and glances shyly at Ryoken. "Um, your food?"

Ryoken reigns his expression back under control by taking a very deep breath, and then gives the poor waitress an apologetic smile, mostly because he knows both of them are very intense, and he thinks one would have to be as clueless as that Shima guy to not feel at least a bit nervous about Yusaku's stare. She seems flattered, though, and he almost rolls his eyes as he talks, as much as he's glad for the interruption.

"Ah, of course, I'm sorry, go ahead."

The waitress starts filling their table after shooting Ryoken yet another bright smile while again ignoring Yusaku as much as possible, putting their food down carefully, and Ryoken helps her by rearranging the jar of water on the table and the glasses, as well as the tea set, moving everything around until there's enough space. He ordered very common dishes that are appropriate for lunch and sometimes dinner for the sake of having Yusaku try as many different dishes as he wanted that weren't hard or particularly expensive depending on the place and quality, and just one dessert to share they'll be having at the end of the meal. Yusaku's probably very familiar with cup ramen, but the one sold on stores has nothing on the home cooked meal itself, and the soba is also pretty good, but the miso soup is just fantastic in this particular restaurant. Ryoken makes sure to evenly divide

the food in between the two of them; he ordered just a bit of everything so they wouldn't get too full, mindful of the possibility of Yusaku having a delicate stomach.

Talking of, he looked a bit lost with this amount of food around him, but Ryoken could clearly see that he was starving, so he pushes the ramen towards him first, wanting to start safely. "Here, this is always fresh here."

Yusaku only hesitates for a second before grabbing the plate and then a pair of chopsticks, whispering a prayer and licking his lips as he picks up some noodles and brings them to his mouth, face a bit flushed over the amount of attention Ryoken is paying to his every move. The noise Yusaku lets out the moment he starts chewing is extremely inappropriate, and Ryoken takes a long sip of scalding hot tea to keep himself under control. Having these thoughts should be *illegal*.

"Good?" He asks, and Yusaku nods absent-mindedly, looking at his plate like it holds the key to his happiness. Ryoken allows himself a small, satisfied smile, and dives into his own plate, deciding to begin with the soba, and hums as the flavor burst in his mouth, reminding him of how hungry he is, making him nod approvingly. "Yeah, it's great. You should drink from the bowl, the soup is just as good..."

Yusaku takes his advice and seems to enter a zone inside his brain in which he's incapable of doing anything but eating, much less keeping up a conversation, and they go through the meal quietly safe for some occasional slurping, only talking to point out how good the food is. A small plate of sushi for them to share arrives shortly afterward, and Yusaku seems particularly entranced by the raw salmon and unagi rolls, Ryoken nodding along to his sounds, allowing himself to fully relax. He has no doubt that Yusaku has at least had proper sushi before, and at least a couple different bowls of ramen, but it's mostly about the homemade touch of the restaurant and the quality of the ingredients than the rarity of the meal itself.

The silence, despite being dominant for most of the meal, is not uncomfortable, and he thinks that this is probably what it's like to just share an afternoon with a friend, perhaps not completely adequate for a proper Christmas celebrations like the ones he used to have, but it makes him feel

lighter, like a weight has been lifted off his shoulders. And, well, perhaps the fact that its Yusaku who's with him adds to that, but he refuses to examine at what degree, especially after having such a charged talk.

By the time they're done with the main course, Ryoken wants nothing more than to just sleep on a bed that doesn't rock with the moving water, but he knows that's not possible and that they have a lot of work to do regarding SOL's files, so they shouldn't take too long on the dessert and go right back to his apartment, and says as much, being answered with agreement and a halfhearted complain about him even ordering a dessert in the first place. Yusaku helps him rearrange the table to its original state, putting the lids back on the pots and inserting their chopsticks back on its wrapping with the ends folded, and it's not long before their waitress appears again carrying a tray with their dessert and a refill of their teacups.

They thank her as she sets the plate and the cups down, and this time she even has the bravery to wink at Ryoken before retreating, Yusaku staring after her with a conflicted expression, and this time Ryoken does roll his eyes, but can't help but be amused by his companion's naivety.

“You’ve probably seen this dessert on street food stands, so you’ll probably feel a kinship to this,” Ryoken jokes, and Yusaku gives him a deadpan look before looking down at their dessert. “I guess dorayaki isn’t really that fancy, but the anko is really good, and the restaurant likes to top it with ice cream.”

Yusaku stares at the dorayaki, anko almost, almost spilling out of the pancakes because of the weight of the ice-cream, and visibly swallows. Ryoken doesn’t hesitate as he takes a fork, provided with the dessert, and takes a bite, sighing pleasantly at the flavor. The anko itself isn’t as sweet as he usually likes his desserts, despite being mixed with honey, but that’s what the pancake and the ice-cream are for. Yusaku grabs the other fork and takes a bit, takes a moment to process the taste, and then nods approvingly.

“It’s good.”

Ryoken grins, and as they keep eating, he notices that Yusaku doesn’t seem to have as much of a sweet tooth as Ryoken does, mostly taking bites with

little to no ice-cream, but he's more than happy to eat it for him. Afterward, their waitress returns with the bill and Ryoken pays because he was the one to make the invite on the first place, leaving the money on the offered tray on the table, and Yusaku again looks a bit uncomfortable, but his eyes are shining as they walk out back to the shopping mall ambiance, seeing the shoppers still running around. His face is flushed and he also looks more relaxed, perhaps just a bit sleepy, and they avoid going back out to the parking long by the same route in which they saw Yusaku's classmate, just in case they run across him again.

"I think it's funny how obsessed he is with Playmaker," Ryoken comments, and Yusaku rolls his eyes quietly, apparently choosing to ignore his teasing, but he won't back down easily. "Just imagine how many things that poster is going to see. Do you think he will hang it facing his bed or—"

"I never want to speak to you again," Yusaku snaps, wincing at the thought of a classmate having a poster of him over his bed. He shivers, and Ryoken huffs out an amused breath, smiling. "I'd rather not think about what Shima does with all his Playmaker merchandise. Zaizen Aoi will have an aneurysm if he actually gives that to her."

"He uses the name of Brave Max on VRAINS, doesn't he?" Ryoken asks, and Yusaku glances at him out of the corner of his eye, suspicious. "He's that kid Faust kidnapped, and I saw a few of those awful news broadcasts. He thinks he's Playmaker's *soulmate*."

"And what is it to you? You're not going to stalk him too, aren't you?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I just thought it would be funny to scare him away a bit—"

"Ryoken, that's not only ridiculous but unnecessary," Yusaku rolls his eyes again, but there's this look in his eye as he stares at Ryoken face that makes him feel like he figured something out, and for the first time that day, he actually panics a bit at the thought of Yusaku having figured out his mindset about what they were, despite already having had a conversation about it. The moment passes as Yusaku stares ahead again, and Ryoken relaxes, but he still feels weary. "Shima is not hurting anyone."

Ryoken snorts. “Tell that to Blue Maiden once he gives her that plushie.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Hope you liked that! Gosh, the last two episodes of the anime were A+, they were great, and I was pleased to know I sort of understand where the writers are trying to take Ryoken's character, because, let's be honest, he's a bit of a wild card sometimes, and everyone else is just as intriguing, as in Lighting's and Spectre's duel is so interesting, and I'm glad they had this idea because their philosophies are so similar yet so different, and I liked that little smug moment the Hanoi's had when Spectre started to turn the duel around. It's a shame that he'll probably get deleted next chapter or something of the sort, but I swear each day that passes I'm even more in love with this anime. Hopefully, it will keep itself on track despite its lows points.

Now, back to fanfiction: How long is this story going to be? Well, I calculate at least two more chapters and then it will be done, for a total of six (and ain't that number nice?) and I should be back at updating weekly (hopefully) since I'll start my next semester on the 18, unless the date gets pushed back. So look forward to that! Also, about this chapter, I don't know much about Japanese meals or etiquette, so I tried to do my best with the help of the internet and go safe instead of experimenting much, for the sake of not making the pace of the chapter feel off and not stress myself out so much. That said, if there are any mistakes or suggestions in here or that I should take into account in the future, please do say, and I will, of course, take it into consideration :)

Anyways, enough ranting, I hope you enjoyed and I'm sorry about leaving you guys in the air a bit these past two weeks, this chapter is what the anticipation of the past three has been building up to, and I hope it delivered. Thank you for reading!

5. Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

Ok so this one is a long one!

I did not expect this to happen, but I can't say I'm not pleased with the result. This chapter is a mix of happy and sad, but don't worry- we still have one more to go! Again, thanks for the support, and I'm excited to finish this, because I'll probably turn this into a part of a series, because I like this universe quite a bit.

So please, sit back and enjoy.

“This is fruitless,” Yusaku sighs, trying to fight off a headache. They’ve been going at this, reading through endless files, for about three hours without any formidable progress. Roboppy’s show in the background doesn’t help their case, nor does Yusaku’s increasing tiredness from working all morning at Café Nagi and his general lack of sleep lately. He’s yawning more often than he’d like. “We’re never going to be done at this pace.”

From behind him, sitting on the only chair available to properly reach his kitchen counter in a comfortable manner, Ryoken grunts in acknowledgment, and Yusaku turns to look at him from his spot on the couch. His shoulders are tense, and he’s leaning on his hand as he reads what Yusaku thinks might be an email from the particularly annoying tech support department guy, complaining about the database overflow on Link VRAINS again. His presence hasn’t gotten any less weird since they arrived back from what Yusaku has to admit was a fantastic meal and enlightening conversation, and he still kind of can’t believe this is happening. He also wonders where all of their efforts are even going, because they will never truly make considerable progress like this, much less find something useful.

“We could probably speed this up by word search and cross-referencing, but even like that it will take several days because most of these are low-

quality scans..." Ryoken says, shaking his head, and turns to look at Yusaku with a tired expression. "I found something of interest, but it will probably only lead me into a dead end. Anything from you?"

"I think I mostly got tech complains, but I found a report from an intern that seems to hint at something. I've been having trouble finding the rest of the thread, though," he brings a hand to his face to rub his eyes, and then shakes his head. "I'm starting to think Ghost Girl gave us irrelevant information... or that she just downloaded the whole email data and never bothered to filter any of it before giving it to us."

"That's more than likely. This is the last time I trust her services with any confidence. It's like she forgets how to be a decent hacker sometimes..." Ryoken grumbles, seemingly going off in a rant, and Yusaku can't help but allow a small grin to take over his lips as he turns back to his laptop. Despite his cool exterior, Yusaku was quickly coming to realize that Hanoi's leader was as much of a mess as he was. Sure, he had some things together than Yusaku didn't, like money and a 'good background' – as good as it can be when almost no one knows about your father's experiments – but he was still a teenager with funny quirks like these, and a quite petty one at that. Initially, this had been a bit shocking, but he was fast to adjust his perception of Ryoken; he didn't want to oversimplify his life, and the many ways on which he has impacted his own, and getting to know his petty, somewhat childish side, was a part of that. "... barely as skilled as Kusanagi Shoichi, and mind you, that's a compliment, somehow—are you listening to me?"

"No, you're ranting," Yusaku states, closing his eyes and laying further back into the couch. He shouldn't, because he's really sleepily, but resting his sight can't be so bad after reading so many documents and complains about malfunctioning AI's – which, ironic – and people who couldn't use new keyboards supplied by the company for a few of the upper departments. He was never working on a tech support service ever, if he could help it. "I think the amount of empty information we're processing is getting to you."

"How rude," Yusaku hears Ryoken mumbling, and then the sounds of a chair scraping against the ground, footsteps— "Are you going to take a

break?"

Yusaku opens his eyes, not surprised to see him standing over him, hands pressing into the couch's cushions as he leans over to stare down with a raised eyebrow. He doesn't seem to be judging Yusaku for giving his eyes a rest, but he looks a bit unsure about how far he can push their friendly interactions still, something he only noticed about an hour into their research when Yusaku realized they had not said a word to each other in all that time. Ryoken took his own words very seriously; he really believed he has no right to be curious about Yusaku's life, since he's barely spared a glance at the details of his living space since his arrival, not commenting on the fresh laundry smell, or the burn marks on the stove and how chipped his kitchen counter was in the corner from how many times Yusaku had slammed his side on it by accident when sleep deprived. In fact, he had barely paid attention to Yusaku occasionally getting up to find another blanket to burrito himself in, and he was at least respecting a snarky remark about that.

He wonders if their talk back at the restaurant prompted the opposite of what he had expected when they first left—that Ryoken was somehow coming to accept that Yusaku cared, that he could have a life if only he dared to go against his father's wishes and work with them to achieve coexisting with the Ignises. He didn't want to push or manipulate him in any way, and the only reason why Yusaku has been repeating his words so much is that Ryoken needed to hear it, to consider that perhaps he's wrong, because there's no one else to make him do so. The Knights of Hanoi, his lieutenants, they were loyal to Kogami Kiyoshi before they were to Ryoken, and only to him because he was loyal to his father, and Spectre was too invested on Ryoken's wishes to end the Ignises and finish his mission to even have a semblance of a say in this. He was surrounded by enablers, in short, that only wanted to get rid of their own guilt and make him happy by letting him take on a task that has essentially ruled his life and should have never been his responsibility to carry on.

Once again, it came down to the two of them, but this time Yusaku wasn't sure obtaining a result was possible—this wasn't a duel that could be turned around thanks to a lucky draw or using a Skill, or an AI he could

keep prisoner in his Duel Disk, this was a real person, with feelings and motivations, and as much as dueling was a strong form of communication between them, in the end it was just means to an end, a game of fate. Ryoken's mind could only be changed by himself, and even then, perhaps not in the way Yusaku is hoping it will, just like he suggested during their meal.

"You're spacing out— I think you're the one who needs a break," Ryoken points out, and Yusaku focus back on his face, staring blankly for a few seconds. He stifles a yawn, and then, with a tired voice, finally blurts out:

"I need coffee," and starts to slowly untangle himself from his burrito. Ryoken watches, seemingly without surprise at his outburst, and only once he's free from his self-imposed prison and standing up does Yusaku bothers to ask: "Do you want some?"

"Black?" Ryoken asks, mouth twitching at the corners, and Yusaku almost rolls his eyes at him. He noticed in the restaurant that he seemed to be a fan of sugary things, and he could not relate. Too much sugar made his stomach protest unless he's had a substantial meal, and he wasn't that fond of the taste of sweets anyway. The dessert they had back at the restaurant had been delicious, but that was enough for one day. Still, that didn't mean Yusaku would make him drink black coffee, even if he was sure Ryoken would agree if only to avoid being rude.

"I have some milk and sugar around... but I don't know how old the milk is," Yusaku shrugs, moving around Ryoken and the couch to step into the kitchen, sighing heavily as he tries to keep down yet another yawn.

His kitchen is small, with a one door white fridge that's almost always empty nowadays because he's been spending his meals with Kusanagi-san, a shitty microwave that he's had to repair several times, an electric stove and oven with the aforementioned scorch marks from past accidents he hasn't been able to get rid of and that are just as faulty, and enough cabinets for his utensils and pots that are very limited in number, seeing as he also usually recycles the plastic takeaway containers instead of using plates most of the time. All in all is not much, but it's the part of his apartment that

Yusaku actually enjoys using and being in beside his bed and the couch. He's not that good at cooking, despite his attempts at learning from YouTube, but he likes it anyway, one of the small numbers of things he enjoys outside of... well, most of the things he enjoyed were out of necessity, and cooking could probably apply, but it was still nicer than doing nothing at times.

"You don't know if it's expired?" Ryoken interrupts his train of thought, and Yusaku looks up from turning on the stove to boil some water to shrug at him again. Ryoken seems perturbed by this. "Be honest, do you usually live like this?"

"Not really, it's just that the situation with SOL and Lighting has kept me out of here; sometimes I just stay over at Takeru's rental or he stays here because it's better than Kusanagi-san having to drive each of us or invade his home after a full day of work," Yusaku explains, looking down at the stove again, and grabs the pot he used that morning to make coffee to fill it with the bottled water he has lying beside the sink, setting it down on the stove to let it boil. He doesn't have a coffee maker yet, but he'll get one when he has some time to look for some that aren't otherworldly expensive and preferably easy and fast to use. "My apartment has actually been kind of a mess this last few weeks because of that, but our meeting motivated me to clean this morning— Roboppy was delighted to have some use again."

"... Glad to be of service, then," Ryoken mumbles with a strange ring to his tone, but Yusaku doesn't pay it any mind until Ryoken asks a question. "Did you really accidentally butt dialed me, by the way?"

Yusaku feels his ears heat up as he remembers how mortifying that call was, and barely keeps himself from dropping his head into his hands in despair to hide from his shame. He has been determined to ignore that that even happened, and so he wasn't ready to be questioned about it. A bit awkwardly, he clears his throat.

"Yeah, that's what happened. I had just arrived home and forgot to take my phone out of my pocket when I sat down," he says, diving deep into the lie. He hopes his face is as blank as always, because the thing is, he has no problem blaming Ai, but explaining why Ai did that, and what he was

trying to allude to before the call happened? Yeah, no way. “Just an accident.”

“Hm, that’s...” Ryoken begins, still with a weird voice, but when Yusaku turns to see him, a bit worried about him seeing through his lie, he’s just looking towards the fridge, gesturing with one elegant hand. “May I open your fridge to check the milk?”

Yusaku considers it for a few seconds, trying to remember if he has some incriminating leftovers from a few days ago still in it. He cleaned the *apartment*; he was not expecting for his fridge to be used by anyone but him. Still, he tries to keep on top of the things he refrigerates, so if there’s something, it won’t be *that* bad. “Sure. Mugs are on the cupboard beside it, so you can put those out as well.”

He turns back to watch the water and pulls out the instant coffee from the cupboard to his left. It’s not the fanciest, but it certainly gets the job done for him, so he hopes Ryoken won’t mind; he has no idea if he’s the kind of guy that likes drinking pure coffee, or expensive coffee, or exotic coffee, or fancy coffee— Yusaku has always only ever known store brands, and some cups here and there he’s had from shops and actual cafes. Kusanagi-san usually uses store brands as well, so he can’t really say he’s had many types of coffee to choose from and compare.

Hearing movement behind him, as well as the sound of his fridge opening, Yusaku turns to witness his guest, rival, and savior taking a good sniff at his milk carton and then shrugging, looking down at it with indifference.

“Smells fine, so if I get sick, it was at my own risk.”

“Cheers to that,” Yusaku grumbles, thinking about the rapidly dropping temperature as the night approaches. Roboppy had once calculated how much time it would take for Yusaku to get sick if the heating happened to fail, based on previous occasions, and determined that the lack of heating during cold periods would mean that Yusaku would probably get sick over the next 48 hours after it failed, if past experiences and recurring patterns stayed consistent— which Yusaku could admit, they usually did, so at this point he was just counting down the hours for a cold to hit, and made a

mental note to buy some medicine later, and find where exactly he left his heating pads last time, because he only remembers them being somewhere in his room. It's been more than 48 hours; the fact that he's not sick is a miracle in and of itself.

He *really* should complain to his landlord about these things, because colds and fevers, in general, are just bad for him, sometimes making him unable to move and giving him awful headaches and pains, making him a walking virus and skip school and any form of socializing until he got at least forty percent better than his initial state of horribleness, which is something that he just can't have right now, with all that's happening. He can't afford to be sick. Now, because of his paranoia and the neglect he's given the apartment lately, he's also worried about anything else being out of service without him noticing. He hopes that the shower is working fine, though it was okay this morning, he knows anything could happen and Roboppy would have said something about it by now...

“Yusaku,” Ryoken calls, snapping him out of his thoughts, and when he turns his head to look, he’s raising his eyebrows at him. “The water’s boiling.”

“Shit,” he whispers, realizing it’s true and that he spaced out *again*. This just wouldn’t do.

Moving fast, Yusaku turns off the heat and grabs the mugs Ryoken pulled out and left beside him on top of the counter, carefully pouring out the water. He normally wouldn’t let it get to a boil, but this is what they would be dealing with now that Yusaku was apparently incapable of being aware of his surroundings. This was just further proof that he was, in fact, getting sick, and as he mixed in the instant coffee in their mugs he longed for a warm shower and a nap, but figured, as he handed Ryoken one of the mugs and ignored his disgusted expression at him taking a sip without adding any sugar, that it would have to wait. Perhaps he should just pull out his heating pads *now*.

“Sugar’s on the plastic container beside the stove. Go wild,” Yusaku mumbles, walking around him to head into his bedroom. Those heating pads really did sound great right about now. “I’ll be back in a bit.”

It occurs to him that he's being too trusting of a cyber-terrorist and former enemy, but then just snorts out loud as he steps into his bedroom and opens up his closet, knowing that Ryoken, when he wasn't actively trying to be menacing, was about as inoffensive as a kitten and minded his own business, which is further proof that he's been manipulated by his circumstances to lead a criminal life. Kneeling down to look through the boxes at the bottom and taking another sip from his coffee before setting down on the floor, he's lucky enough to find the heating pads on the first he opens and hums happily when he realizes the long one he usually sits on still has battery power in it. They are a bit old, and probably will stop working if he gives them much use, which is why he only gets them out during the winter. They were more expensive than almost everything else in the house – decent WiFi, a TV, a VRAINS log in room, Roboppy, and a desktop computer were *not* cheap, and probably the reason why he didn't have some extra money – because the really cheap ones he initially bought were trash, so he treats his current ones with care.

When he comes back to the living room, Ryoken has set up camp on the couch as well, sitting with his laptop on his lap and a focused expression as he sips from his coffee. It's a bit of a shocking picture, and it gives Yusaku pause as he stares, because he's seen this image dozens, if not hundreds of times before with Takeru and Kusanagi, and it shouldn't be any different with Ryoken, but somehow, it is. Still, he has no wish to analyze this right now, so instead, he just blinks and brings his mug up to his lips, walking over to arrange the heating pad where he'll be sitting beside him. Ryoken barely glances at him out of the corner of his eyes as he does this, completely immersed in his work.

“Already back at it?” Yusaku asks, setting his cup down on the small coffee table in front of him and finally dropping down on the couch and reaching for his laptop, pressing the 'on' button of the heating pad once he's settled. He grabs one of his blankets and pulls it over his lap for good measure.

“There's no time to waste, and the sun is already going down,” Ryoken shrugs, takes another sip from his cup and grimaces, all while still looking down at his screen. “I don't think that milk was as good as I believed. Are you sitting on a heating pad?”

His voice seems to raise incredulously at the end, and Yusaku can't help but snort, shaking his head in amusement. He stares ahead at the TV, watching a very confusing series of events develop on Roboppy's telenovela. She makes the occasional distressed noise, but he cannot understand anything that's happening in front of him right now.

“Yeah, I am. Why do you ask?”

“Because I can *feel* it,” Ryoken stresses, and Yusaku turns to look at him, already finding him staring. “Do you use these often?”

“During the winter only. Does it bother you? I can turn down the heat a bit —” Yusaku tries to appease him, but Ryoken just shakes his head and stares down at his screen again, leaving him a bit confused about his questioning.

“It's fine, I was just wondering.”

Yusaku stares at his stone hard, serious profile, and decides not to push it. Instead, he wonders if this information will be added to Hanoi's database as a curious fact about him, perhaps a way to lure him into a trap, and takes another sip of his coffee. He's no sick yet, but wandering thoughts like this are clearly an indication that it's coming, and after reaching that conclusion, he chooses to focus back on their task.

It's not after another hour of incessant reading and wishing he had a coffee machine that Yusaku finally stumbles into something interesting, and the realization almost makes him cry out of relief.

“I found something,” he announces in the blankest tone of voice he possesses because he cannot find it in himself to be excited about this, and he still doesn't quite know that this is not a dead-end. The words do catch Ryoken's attention, as he perks up quite considerably from his slumped position on the couch. Yusaku elaborates: “Seems like a progress report on the blueprints for a ‘new device that will lead humanity towards a new era.’ Yikes. The blueprint is not on this particular folder, but I do remember Takeru pointing out that he saw some on another one.”

“Interesting. Is there any reference number on it?” Ryoken asks, and Yusaku notices how his eyes narrow ever so slightly as he leans over to read the document from Yusaku’s screen. He catches a whiff of some sweet scent coming from him, and realizes it must be some flowery cologne he put on, that’s just soft enough to not be overwhelming. It’s pretty nice, and Yusaku involuntarily hums pleasantly at it. Ryoken does not seem to notice this as he talks again, leaning away. “So, no reference number... really, how did Ghost Girl even organize this?”

“I don’t think she did beyond putting different types of documents of every folder by date. It probably could have been worse, but this is not efficient at all,” Yusaku says, agreeing with the sentiment behind Ryoken’s words. He stretches his arms over his head, almost hitting Ryoken in the face, and lets out a pleasant sigh as his bones crack loudly, making Ryoken wince. He has an idea. “Wait a second, I need to talk with Takeru.”

“What for?” Ryoken frowns, looking him over like Yusaku is going to pull Takeru out of his pockets or a broom closet as he stands up, immediately missing the warm from his blanket and heating pad.

“Well, he looked over some blueprints— he might remember the folder name, or perhaps even the date,” Yusaku points out, and walks towards the kitchen counter to grab his phone, then quickly sits back down, trying not to lose any amount of body warm. He continues explaining his idea to Ryoken: “See, if he remembers at least the folder he’ll make our job easier, and then we can search for the thread of this email by focusing on the dates, both on them and on the blueprints. I’m guessing every progress report will come with some info attached, so the more of those we found—”

“The less we have to look and the easiest our job becomes,” Ryoken finishes, nodding along. He crosses his arms as he thinks it over, and Yusaku’s been trying to ignore it until now, but when they got back from lunch Ryoken took off his jacket, and this is the first time Yusaku has been able to see his arms, and he’s... conflicted, over how nice and strong they look, skin perfectly tanned and pulled around lean muscles, and he swallows when his eyes inevitably drift down to grab a quick look before he’s back at looking for Takeru’s number. Considering he has like seven contacts, including the therapist he’s not seeing and his landlord, he

shouldn't be taking this long. Ryoken continues, obviously not noticing Yusaku's lapse in focus. "Alright, let's see if Soulburner comes through with something useful."

Yusaku finally finds the number and hits the call button, silently hoping he's not interrupting any celebrations Takeru might be in the middle of. The phone rings exactly two times before Takeru picks up, and Yusaku's never been more relieved to hear his upbeat voice.

"Hey, Yusaku! What's up!?" He says, but it feels more like he's excitedly screaming. Yusaku suddenly remembers that their last conversation was about the possibility of Yusaku feeling lonely during Christmas, and feels dread crawl up his throat. This should be interesting. "How's your Christmas treating you?"

"Fine, could be worse," And then, because Yusaku doesn't want to have this conversation with Ryoken staring at him expectantly, he immediately goes to ask what he needs to know. "Uh, Takeru, you wouldn't happen to remember the name of the folders with blueprints you were looking at yesterday, would you?"

"Ah, Yusaku, are you seriously looking through all that stuff again? By yourself?" He answers instead, and Yusaku sighs heavily. He should have guessed Kusanagi didn't fill him in about this little meeting with their sort of former enemy. "I thought you were just going to stream the Link VRAINS Christmas Event!"

Clearly hearing Takeru's words despite him not being on speaker, Ryoken snorts and then immediately tries to hide it with a cough. Yusaku is tempted to shove him off the couch.

"I was, but the rewards were awful and I was bored, so," Yusaku excuses himself, his voice a bit defensive, and he knows is towards both of their reactions. He is, factually, surrounded by idiots. "I decided to keep looking through these to get ahead, and found some interesting things. Any luck you remember?"

“Eh, let me think, I think I remember the date, but not the folder? I know it was dated June this year, yeah, the twenty-something, but the folder beats me because Ghost Girl put all those numbers in their names...” Takeru sighs, and Yusaku can almost imagine him shrugging off his lack of understanding of coding and encryption. “Um, I think it was the second or middle row, and they were a bunch of zip files as well inside that folder. Does that work for you?”

“Yes, thank you. That’s really helpful,” Yusaku nods, already looking for the folder in his laptop. He creates a new one before he does so to drop the email in it so they can have actually useful information in a more accessible place, instead of going back and forth all the time. Ryoken watches with interest. “Ok, I’ll go now, thanks for the help—”

“Aw, Yusaku, don’t be like that! At least tell me what you’ve been up to today,” Takeru interrupts, and Yusaku, despite his urgency to get back to work, can’t help but let his shoulders relax a bit, longing for the usual chatter that came along with Takeru. He wasn’t a very talkative person, but he liked to listen to other people talk, and it felt nice to know he somehow managed to find a friend that enjoyed listening to him as well, even if he found it quite unnecessary at times, because there was never much going on with him.

“Well, not much... I cleaned up my apartment, figured it was time, and the heating is still not working. Kusanagi-san and I had a bit of busy morning, but everything went fine, really,” Yusaku explains, voice soft. “I had a nice lunch as well, and I’m using one of my heating pads—”

“The one you sit on? Damn, you really ought to call your landlord.”

“Yeah, I can feel a cold coming. I think I’ll have to head out to buy some medicine soon, but other than that, I didn’t do much,” he paused, considering the events of the day. “Well, I did leave Ai locked on Café Nagi’s desk drawer, so—”

“You what!? Oh shit, he’s going to be so angry!” Takeru laughs, and Yusaku allows himself a smile over the sound. Ai is going to be absolutely furious.

“Man, that’s gold! Flame is going to flip his shit— ah, sorry grandma. Um, language, you know.”

Yusaku raises one skeptical eyebrow. “Sure. Am I free to go now?”

“Ugh, why are you always such a mood killer, uh?” Takeru jokes, and then sighs deeply. “Anyways, I’m glad you are doing okay. I know that what I said to you before leaving bothered you, so I’m sorry about that—”

“There’s no need—”

“—but I just want you to know you deserve some happiness too, ok? It’s why I worry about you sometimes, because you keep isolating yourself. You know grandma would have loved to have you over, so I guess that what I’m trying to say is that you look after yourself, ok? If you’re gonna get sick, call Kusanagi-san or something, or even me, and keep yourself warm. I’ll see you on the 28th, alright?”

Yusaku takes a deep breath, hesitating. He was not expecting Takeru to go off in a tangent like that. It feels nice to know that he somehow managed to make an actual friend, and it makes guilt settle deeply in his bones. He has avoided giving Takeru much information about the nature of his relationship with Ryoken, for the sake of not complicating things and creating more conflict. Takeru already does not trust Ryoken at face value despite him giving away his identity and explaining what happened during and after the Lost Incident simply because of their differences about the fate of the Ignises. They’re not in any way openly hostile towards each other, but Takeru is as quick to anger as he is to laugh, if not quicker, so Yusaku tries to only let them interact if he’s there to steer the conversation away from the current task they might be taking care of. Not telling Takeru about his meeting with Ryoken, and exactly why Ryoken is even so important for him in the first place feels like he’s lying to his face, and he does not appreciate the feeling at all.

He makes a mental note to explain everything to him once he’s back. “Alright, Takeru, I’ll keep it in mind. It’s been quiet without you around, so have a nice Christmas. I’ll see you in a few days.”

“Merry Christmas, Yusaku! Take care!”

And then, with a sigh, Yusaku hangs up the phone and sets it on top of the coffee table. Ryoken is watching his every move with a strange expression, and Yusaku quietly rearranges his heating pad and his blanket underneath him as he waits for whatever is about to come.

“So...” Ryoken starts, a bit hesitant, so Yusaku shifts to face him, and is immediately surprised by the light expression on his face, but there's something... weird about it. “You left the Ignis in a drawer.”

Yusaku takes in a sharp breath, his face heating. “Look, I was very busy—”

“Sure,” Ryoken chuckles, shaking his head. Yusaku watches him closely and notices the weird look is also in his eye, and he's pretty curious about what's going through his mind right now. “So, you and Soulburner, uh?”

Yusaku blinks. “Takeru and I what?”

Ryoken opens his mouth, closes it, and then narrows his eyes. “You know what, never mind. What did he say about the blueprints?”

Yusaku stares for a few seconds in absolute confusion. What the hell just happened? What was Ryoken trying to imply? What? Blinking, Yusaku tries to ignore the awkwardness in the air and clears his throat, shifting his eyes back to his screen.

“So, he thinks the folder with the blueprints are on the middle row, around June this year, and I know it's not on the second because we checked those today,” Yusaku explains, already looking through the first few. Ryoken hums in interest. “He also said there were some zip files in it, and I'm guessing they might have more blueprints or even pictures of a prototype.”

“That's good. It means SOL started to develop the technology right on the tails of the Tower of Hanoi and I'm guessing the official start date of the testing, that would be around late August, will match up with Go Onizuka's last sighting before he became a test subject... we might just find a full

briefing of the whole process as we go forward.” Ryoken turns towards his own laptop, starting to look, but just as he does Yusaku clicks on the third folder he’s opened and finds the zips files mixed in with June blueprints, so he taps lightly on Ryoken to get him to look.

“This is it. What’s the date on the email?”

“June 23rd”

Yusaku looks for the date, but instead of only finding a blueprint, he also finds a zip file with the same name. Curious, he opens it, Ryoken again leaning over to watch, and they’re both surprised to see pictures, at least fifty of them, of what’s clearly a prototype. It’s small, and looks exactly how one would expect something that goes inside a human head look. It doesn’t look evil, of course, it’s just a piece of technology that happens to be very, very dangerous, but it makes his stomach clench unpleasantly just thinking about Earth being absorbed and used like he was just a piece of data into one of those things, that just so happens to now be inside Go’s head. It’s just horrifying.

Swallowing, Yusaku notices there’s also a video file, and he hovers the mouse hesitantly over it before glancing at Ryoken.

“Should we look at it? It’s probably just a video of the assembly process, perhaps an explanation of its functions, and we already know what it does,” he reasons, and Ryoken stares at the screen for a few seconds with a grim expression before checking his head.

“No, if there are videos here, we should look for those who tell us more about the testing of it... we’ll probably come across footage of Onizuka’s brain operation at some point,” Ryoken says, voice much softer than Yusaku was expecting, and meets his eyes when he looks up at him, brow furrowed. “Will you be okay with watching those?”

Yusaku takes one second to enjoy the thought of Ryoken being mindful over his PTSD, and then quickly shakes it off. Even if this is triggering for him in a way, he has to push through, simply because he needs to be aware of all the risks, and in case it ever came down to leaking the information to

the public after all, he needed to be sure about it, and that immediately meant he has to have knowledge about the whole procedure.

“I’ll be fine,” Yusaku nods, squaring his shoulders. He’s determined to go through with this. Ryoken only looks hesitant, though, and Yusaku again feels flattered by his worry, but there’s no need. For now, at least.

“Ok, but if it becomes too much—”

“I’ll stop.”

“We will stop, and I will take the information away for my Knights to look over,” Ryoken corrects with a stern expression, and Yusaku raises his eyebrows in surprise as he elaborates. “I won’t take all copies away, of course, but we need to all be in a good state of mind. We’re only humans, but we can’t let this hold us back, for all of our sakes.”

Yusaku nods, turns to his laptop, and starts looking for another zip file that might contain more videos. “I agree. So, if we want to see testing, we should be looking at dates around Go’s duel with Earth, when the chip was already installed.”

“No, a bit farther back. If they sent Onizuka out into the field it was because he was given the green light by the upper executives, which means they had already compiled satisfactory results. Go around mid-September.”

Yusaku does, and finds a bunch of returned and modified blueprints and just one zip file, containing one video only, and he clicks on it without giving it much thought, like ripping off a band-aid. His breath catches a little when it starts playing, being immediately welcomed by the sight of Go, already looking pretty worn down despite not being in the project for as long as he has in current time, staring into the empty as voices check over his body condition and someone announces everything is ready. Ryoken is frozen at his side.

‘Alright, all seems to be going alright. Go, how is everything for you?’

‘Fine. Are we starting anytime soon?’

'Yeah, don't worry. So, prototype #0128, test run #01, test subject Onizuka, Go, age 19. Time: 04:23 pm, September 17. Begin.'

Yusaku does not know what to expect, but it certainly isn't screaming. It makes him jump as whatever machine Go is plugged into starts and he just lets out a pained cry, and Ryoken visibly recoils from the shock. It's not especially awful screaming, only lasts a second, but it's blood-chilling to realize this is what the first few tests probably were like until Go got either adapted to the pain or SOL provided him with something to relieve the pain. It makes him feel automatically nauseous, and now he feels like he won't be able to make it through, as he watches Go grunt and become restless. The screen rearranges to show the simulation he's in, and a cold feeling takes over Yusaku as he realizes Go is dueling Playmaker.

It's just... horrifying to see, to realize just how obsessed Go became with beating him that he put his mind and body through so much strain. Yusaku doesn't like one bit how much it resembles the Lost Incident, what with the dueling AI and the physical and emotional pain he's suffering. This is only the first test of many, all the way from September to November, when their duel took place. He feels awful about how cold he was to him during it, hearing but not taking Go's situation as seriously as he could have, more desperate to find Lighting and end the warfare than anything else, and as the recording continues Yusaku can just stare in frozen horror. This is probably not even the worse of it if the change in Go's body is any indication, and just acknowledging that makes his ears ring and his vision gets blurry, his breath quickening. He knows he's in the midst of a breakdown that's he's been on the edge on since he first considered the possibility of Go doing this to himself, knows he's shaking, but as he watches the duel with the AI develop and Go slowly lose his life points he's taken back to a white room, a familiar but dreadful weight over his head that shouldn't be there, the echoes of crying and screaming that might just be his own, and he wants to go home, why is he here, what did he do, why will no one answer, he doesn't want to keep dueling, this isn't fair, where is he, where is he, is he even alive, *are there people out there, is he alone*—

The laptop in his lap is suddenly being slammed closed, and Yusaku again jumps, feeling the weight of a hand on his forearm gripping tightly, and

instantly panics, blindly scrambling off the couch and falling to the floor with a painful ‘tud!’ that resonates in his bones as he almost hits his head and collides against his side. The hand is still gripping him, but he doesn’t know where he is, can’t remember what he was doing, only knows he has to run away, he has to, or they’ll take him back there again, they’ll make him duel until he can’t stand can’t breathe and he’s so tired, so, so tired of being alone, if someone would *just please talk to him...*

“Hey, you,” someone says, a familiar voice, and Yusaku freezes, immediately stops struggling, but stays tense, alert, hyper-aware of the voice and the hand *that’s still gripping him*— “Hey, you. Think of three reasons.”

Gasping for air still, Yusaku blinks in confusion. His vision is too blurry, and he doesn’t like that at all, he needs to know where he is. He starts to try and twist his arm out of the grip it’s in but the action only results in that iron grip *tightening*, and the pain is— grounding, almost, but also makes alert flare up inside him, heart beating way too fast. Still, he grasps at that fleeting feeling of lucidness, trying to hold on to it, a voice in his head telling him to try and relax, but he can’t, he still can’t see where he is, there are only colors, and he’s crying too much.

“Three reasons?” he asks, hears his own panicked voice but fails to process it as his own. The grip on his arms goes away, but it’s replaced by a hand in his shoulder pulling him in, and he’s so, so confused, so scared.

“Three reasons, Yusaku. Three reasons to relax, three reasons to breathe in, three reasons to stay still,” the voice whispers, now closer, and Yusaku struggles to understand. “Can you try to spell them out for me?”

“Three reasons?” he repeats, incapable of thinking of anything else.

“Yes, Yusaku, three reasons. For anything.”

“Anything?”

“Yes.”

“I— one, to uncover the mysteries of my past,” he begins, letting his mouth take over, forming familiar words. “Two, to take revenge on those who hurt us. Three...”

He drifts off, staring at the empty. The third reason, the most important one... what was it?

“What was the third, Yusaku?” the voice asks, and Yusaku closes his eyes, takes a deep breath. Consciousness is returning to him slowly, and he’s now aware of other things, like the sound of the TV, the warm of a body close to him, the steady rhythm of breathing that he tries to mimics, and as things become less intense, more familiar, cold air making him shiver and lavender detergent filling his lungs, he remembers the third reason.

“... to save the one who saved me.”

He opens his eyes as he whispers it, blinking out the tears, and slowly becomes acquitted with his situation. Roboppy is standing within his eyesight, on the other side of the coffee table. He’s on the floor, and his side hurts like a bitch, and he feels cold from head to toe. Ryoken is leaning over him with a hand on his shoulder, also on the floor, and his expression says a thousand words, worry, fear, anxiety, hesitation, and Yusaku closes his eyes again as he recognizes heartbreak in his eyes, being familiar with it from how many times he’s seen it reflected in the mirror.

This is not how he imagined his Christmas going.

“Sorry,” he croaks out, voice dry. He needs water, but he doesn’t dare stand up while still shaking from head to toe. “I should have known I wouldn’t react to it very well.”

“Don’t worry, I should have known too. Do you want something to drink?” Ryoken is quick to answer, the hand on Yusaku’s shoulder tightening as he leans into it for comfort.

“Water, please.”

“I’ll get it!” Roboppy announces lightly, and Yusaku flinches and finally opens his eyes again. Ryoken managed to school his expression into something less revealing and Yusaku is, perhaps a bit selfishly, glad. He doesn’t have the mental capability to process any emotions right now, and what he wants the most is just a nap and perhaps to be alone until he can become a full person again.

Silence engulfs them as they stare at each other, and there’s probably a thousand words they could say right now to make light of the situation, but none of them come to Yusaku, and Ryoken seems to be just as clueless. How do you brush off a panic attack that you all but promised you wouldn’t have? Especially when the person that saw you and got you out of it means the world to you, and is clearly feeling guilty about his role in your life? Yusaku is just not emotionally equipped to deal with this exact situation, and any attempts he makes to dismiss his worries and tell him it’s not his fault will probably be welcome negatively, and open a whole can of worms that he feels Ryoken is not ready to go through at his current mindset.

Roboppy comes back with a glass full of water, and Yusaku takes it gratefully, swallowing it down slowly, taking small sips. His heartbeat is still a bit irregular, and he can tell his side is bruising from his fall. Ryoken’s grip on his arm probably leave a mark as well, and the thought makes him recoil internally; he could not find out about that if it was true, or it would make everything worse.

“... I think I should leave,” Ryoken says, softly. Yusaku nods, despite not wanting him too, and shifts away from him, trying to create some distance between them. This... is not an ideal end to this day, but he can’t think of anything to avoid it. “Will you be okay by yourself?”

“Sure,” Yusaku shrugs, and tries to stand up by leaning his arm on the couch. Ryoken is there helping him up in an instant, but once he’s fully upwards, he lets go of Yusaku like the very act of touching him burns his skin. He tries not to get upset about it, but he’s completely out of his depth, already feeling a knot on the back of his throat that indicates he’ll be probably shedding even more tears tonight. “I’ll be fine, I just need to... relax.”

Ryoken visibly winces at the way Yusaku's voice trembles a bit, and once again he seems on the verge of saying something, but all he does, in the end, is nod and pick up his stuff, and Yusaku really can't blame him—he could stop him, it would be so, so easy to do so... but he doesn't, because he has no idea what he would do from there. Instead, he sits on his couch and watches as Ryoken folds the blankets lying on the floor and the sofa, takes their empty coffee cups and washes them, makes sure Yusaku's laptop is fine, and walks towards the door to put his coat and shoes back on. He stops, once he's done, and looks back at Yusaku with a hesitant expression that slowly turns into the cold determination that he's much more familiar with, and he now knows that he's probably made a mistake somewhere.

"If I find something of interest I'll make sure to notify you," Ryoken nods, voice as cool as it was when he arrived, and it feels like all progress made during the day was completely erased and they're back at being tentative allies. He doesn't like it.

"I'll be waiting then," Yusaku answers, and then turns away from the door to avoid the sight of Ryoken turning his back on him, hears the footsteps, the door opening and closing, and once he's sure he's alone, only Roboppy to witness his shame, Yusaku lays face down on his couch and buries his face in his arms, letting the tears fall freely.

He falls asleep.

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(Needless to say, Ryoken feels like he just made a mistake, like he should have stayed, but the sight of Yusaku breaking down, the absolute terror in

his eyes, was a cruel reminder of what his life is, what he's meant to do, who he is and who he needs to be.

It does nothing to make him feel better, and when he arrives back at the boat, he ignores his lieutenants and just shoves the laptop with the info at them.

He needs to calm down and get over it, otherwise, he'll start making more mistakes.)

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm sorry.

But I hope you guys liked that :)

Also, please tell me if I should add any warnings to this, because I wasn't sure and I tried not to make it explicit for the sake of the rating. I'd like to hear your thoughts.

6. Chapter 6

Notes for the Chapter:

Ah, I can't believe we're at the end... this has been quite the rollercoaster, to be honest, it's been amazing to see the support this got and I'm very grateful for those of you who have been here since day one. I'm proud of myself for finishing this, and hopefully, you will be as pleased with the end as I was. As you can see, there are seven chapters now instead of six, and this happened because the draft for the last chapter grew in ways I was not expecting, so you can take this as part one. I should be uploading number seven shortly after this one. On another note, I can't wait to write more of this verse! I already have something planned, but I'll keep my lips sealed for now :)

As you can probably tell by the sudden increase in the word count, this is a lengthy finale, so please, sit back, relax, maybe get a snack, and enjoy.

Yusaku wakes up with a runny nose and a thunderous headache, and as soon as he processes this, he buries his face in his couch cushions in despair. This is a bad idea, first because he can't properly breathe, and second because the only smell that registers in his nose is the faint remains of Ryoken's scent, which in turn reminds him of what happened, and remembering that makes him want to just curl up in a ball and never wake up ever again.

Still, he knows he can't stay like this or he will get worse, so he slowly sits up, wincing at the pull of his stiff limbs. The apartment is, if possible, even colder than earlier in the day and he's shivering from head to toe. Roboppy plugged herself in for the night already, probably assuming that Yusaku wouldn't be getting up anytime soon or done with her show, so she was charging in a corner right beside the TV, the lights of every single room except for the bathroom on, so with a groan, Yusaku stands up and starts looking for his phone, needing to know what hour is it— Ryoken probably left around six-thirty and considering his exhaustion, he most likely slept

very little, if the absence of his usual nightmares after panic attacks meant anything.

Finding his phone is a hopeless ordeal in the beginning, because he can't exactly remember where he left it after his talk with Takeru, and Ryoken moved things around before leaving, the blankets neatly folded and the kitchen clean, so he wanders through his apartment for about five minutes before he finds it buried in between the couch cushions. According to it, it's about seven-fifteen o' clock, which is not that bad for a cat nap if his calculations about Ryoken leaving at six-thirty are correct. There's a notification in his lock screen, a text from Takeru telling him to take it slow and enjoy the rest of his day and that's— awfully convenient, considering what happened after he got off the phone with him. It sends a flare of hot anger and frustration through him to remember it, as well as shame about his own weakness; Yusaku has long ago stopped being ashamed by his psychological issues, things that he could not control in any way, shape or form and were just a part of who he was, but it's still upsetting that this happened at all, and in front of Ryoken, no less.

It makes him feel reckless for about five hot seconds in which he unlocks his phone, goes to his contact list, opens up Ryoken contact information and lets his finger hover over the call button as he stares at the numbers. It would be so incredibly easy to do it, to call him and demand a talk with him to clear things up, to ask him to come back, but as his anger with himself slowly drains away, he realizes he can't do that. It's not just that Ryoken might need the time and space to think and process the events of the day over, but also that Yusaku knows he's in no condition to get into an argument or discussion with him— his hands are still shaking, there's still cold sweat running down his back, and he knows without even trying to talk that he's gone non-verbal for who knows how long, an imaginary numbness making him unable to make a sound, another side effect of the Lost Incident.

There was so much screaming during those six months, so much crying, that Yusaku just stopped talking for about a year, relishing in the silence, in the absence of his desperate cries and the normalcy of everyone around him talking softly to him as if to not spook him. He got over it eventually,

coming to the conclusion that he would need to talk again one day if he was hoping to save the one who saved him and find out the truth, but then days like this came around and he just... kept his silence. It's been a while since it happened, so this is not really surprising as much as it is frustrating.

He closes the dial-up app on his phone with a heavy sigh and instead goes to answer Takeru's text—he feels like being honest with him and tell him about what's been actually happening throughout the day, consequences be damned, and Yusaku knew he would understand, even if he was going to be shocked or even mildly upset at the beginning. He starts, fingers clumsy, by letting him know about his non-verbal situation to avoid a fruitless phone call.

something happened today.

i've gone quiet.

what?????

we talked not two hours ago!

i don't know how to explain...

it's okay, take your time

try with the obvious reason why?

'I wasn't alone today,' Yusaku starts writing, and then immediately deletes it. He's not regretting telling Takeru about this, but he's hesitant about bringing Ryoken into this conversation so quickly. He wants to talk to him, to get the edge off a little, but it would mean revealing everything over texts instead of telling him about their connection face to face, where he can control what assumptions he could make about it as they appeared.

He's lied or omitted the truth about Ryoken from Takeru before, and the result wasn't pretty. In his mind, an ideal future would mean no intervention from a rough Ignis or from a mega-corporation, no lingering lies, no secrets about the events leading up to and after the Lost Incident, no open hatred

between any of them. But he knows that's not realistic, that their past will always be a problem. He was not willing to forgive the Knights in their entirety; Dr. Taki, Faust, Genome... the three of them actively participated and allowed Kogami Kiyoshi to get away with his experiments, leaving the decision to his own kid to save them from that hell, and no amount of regret from them will change that in his eyes. They deserved to be held responsible for their actions, and at least Dr. Taki and Faust seemed aware of that to some degree. Spectre was another issue entirely, and Yusaku wanted to avoid any more headaches as much as possible.

So, instead of opening this particular can of worms, as Yusaku reads over Takeru's last text again, he decides to focus on what triggered him in the first place, for the sake of keeping this conversation isolated from Ryoken until he came back to Den City.

i found some videos of go's experiments on the folder you mentioned

it wasn't very nice to see

that bad?

yes. i couldn't get through even half of the first one

:(
:(

i'm kind of glad I was so slow at going through them then..

do you need anything?

i'm okay now

just wanted to give you a warning

you sure? :/

i can come back early

no, enjoy your christmas. i'll be fine

you could tell me about your day?

sure thing :)

Yusaku and Takeru spent the best part of the next two hours texting. By the end of their conversation, Yusaku feels better, even if it's a bit superficial. He learns about the homemade katsudon his grandma cooked up and about Kiku convincing him to go to the movies and going shopping for gifts, as well as his grandpa tearing him a new one about his martial arts training, almost literally (*'normally he tries to pull his punches but I guess he doesn't appreciate me getting into vr that much'*). Yusaku says goodbye feeling lighter than before, but dread is still clinging to him in the form of a heavy weight on the bottom of his stomach, so he decides to forego any sleeping, not excited to be greeted by any nightmares. So, instead of resting, he just heats up some of the tea he has on the fridge with the microwave, watches a cooking show for about an hour, and then logs into his second Link VRAINS account to reap useless rewards from the Christmas event until he can't keep his eyes open any longer.

He runs across Blue Angel once or twice, and she doesn't recognize him at all, which it's to be expected— his second avatar looks nothing like Playmaker or himself, and it's pretty low-level, so he only ever uses him when he's bored to participate in events like these that don't require any dueling. It's a fresh breath of air, but again, it does nothing but calm him down slightly, as well and keeping him alert enough to avoid sleep. He still can't stop thinking about Ryoken, and most prominent the more the hours pass, Go's predicament. He's heard nothing of him since their duel, not from Hanoi or from Zaizen Akira, and they have been unsuccessful on tracking him down, making it clear that he's probably still under SOL's claws, his recovery being kept under wraps inside the company itself. It makes him shiver and remember that he has no medicine apart from the tea he's been drinking for the whole night, so he takes that opportunity to get up from his position on the couch, and gear up in his jacket, scarf and winter boots to walk to a pharmacy.

It's dark outside, and it reminds him of the previous night in which Ai prompted their meeting by not minding his own business, and his heart aches again as Ryoken's panicked expression flashes across his mind. This

is not fun, he concludes, and his face must be even blander than usual, or maybe he looks worse than he thinks, because the girl that checks out his stuff once he's paying gives him a scared and uncomfortable look until he leaves, which he thinks it's kind of rude towards a customer, but he can hardly blame her as he thinks over the reasons for her unease:

1. He probably looks a like a mess and completely dead inside.
2. He didn't say a word during the whole process of entering, picking his stuff, and paying.
3. He bought extra-strong sleeping pills and several bottles of common cold and cough medicine, which might look slightly suspicious at eleven-forty-five at night.

Ah, shit, he thinks, realizing he also lapsed back into listing things in three's — he never really stopped, because it was ingrained into his being by this point, but more recently he's done it for things he actually needs lists and order for, like shopping and keeping his priorities about his own wellbeing straight, something he clearly fails at because he spent over two hours on Link VRAINS before he actually remembered to buy his medicine. Well, there was nothing to do about that right now except accept it, so he shrugged to himself as he walked back to his apartment, got in, and knocked some of the cold medicine back, just a little to give his system time to decide whether he was truly sick or not, in hopes of the answer being no.

He takes one look at the sleeping pills and then throws them in a drawer in the kitchen underneath some napkins and leftover tinfoil paper, where he'll hopefully forget about them. He doesn't want to lean on drugs of any kind to sleep without nightmares, but getting them is a precaution more than anything. He still has a few hours to kill until sunrise, so with some hesitation, Yusaku grabs his laptop and goes to YouTube to look for some baking ideas to carry one once the sun is up, thinking it might help him keep his mind off things and that it would be nice to give Kusanagi-san something sweet for Christmas to thank him for his gift. He should also bake something for Takeru, because he was very helpful to him earlier, but about three hours later, after making a playlist with at least twenty different recipes to try, he starts nodding off and closes his eyes, thinking that just having a nap would be nice.

This is a mistake, he learns very quickly.

He isn't back at being in the white room where his torture took place, nor dueling and losing his life points without being able to do anything about it. Rather than taking his usual spot on his own nightmares, Yusaku is back on Ryoken's seaside mansion, looking out through the windows to the sea, much like he did back when the Tower of Hanoi fell. There's something different this time though, something that makes dread and fear curl in his chest without any apparent reason, and when he turns, he sees Ryoken on his knees, face buried in between white sheets, clutching Kogami Kiyoshi's lifeless hand. A loud and continuous flat line on a monitor indicates that the man is, in fact, dead, and the shaking on Ryoken's body looks more like fury than grief. The sight throws Yusaku into action, stepping forwards to approach him, footsteps echoing across the silence of the room.

But then, right when he's only a couple steps away from him, Ryoken turns to look at him so quickly that it makes him flinch and stand still, his heart stopping in his chest when he registers the cold, angry, hateful expression on his face, the contained fury behind his squared shoulders. He knows, in the back of his mind, that this is a dream, that Ryoken hadn't looked at him like this ever, not even in his avatar, that all the cruel words he pretty much spat on his face during the Tower were those of a grieving man who could not understand how a victim of his actions could be trying to forgive him.

But it feels so real, like Yusaku's truly back where he saved the network and made all that was left of the Knights of Hanoi run away to hide, where he begged Ryoken to seize a new future together for the first time. The light coming from the windows feels the same, the racing of his heart takes him back like this is the reality, and Ryoken's unfriendliness makes him feel like all the months that have passed since weren't real. He knows that's not true, but the intensity of Ryoken's gaze, the coldness behind it making his eyes look simultaneously alive and lifeless is terrifying, and too close to what could have been had Ryoken been a little less forgiving, a lot less imprisoned by his connection to Yusaku, a bit closer to the heartless bastard Yusaku believed Revolver to be before everything came to light.

So, Yusaku stands frozen, watches Ryoken slowly rise from his knees, let go of his father's hand and approach him with his throat dry, panic rising

inside him. He feels threatened by him in a way that's drastically different from how he used to, from how Revolver's influence over Link VRAINS made him feel, and the flatline coming from the monitor as Ryoken comes to a halt in front of him is starting to grate on his nerves.

“You just can't let it be, can you?” Ryoken asks, shaking his head as Yusaku stares in bafflement, not knowing what he means. “Wasn't he enough for you? You have to make me bend to your will as well?”

Yusaku's eyes widen and he takes a step forwards, opens his mouth to talk, ask what he means, what's happening—but no words come out of his mouth except for a helpless and strangled noise that resembles more of an animal than it does his own voice, the flat line becoming a ringing in his ears, continuous and torturous. Ryoken takes another step closer and lifts his hand up to grab him, so Yusaku stumbles back until his back is pressed against the grandiose panoramic window behind him, with no place left to escape to. His eyes are as emotionless as Yusaku's ever seen them, his lips curled in restrained anger, and the fear that rises on his chest feels very, very real, so he braces himself for the worse—

“I sacrificed my life's work for you,” Ryoken says, expression shifting like he's going through character animations on Link VRAINS—quickly, out of nowhere, his voice becoming soft and shaky, and Yusaku suddenly wants the anger back. The anger he knows deeply, knows how to handle, but a broken Ryoken is a sight he does not want to witness. “I ran with my tail between my legs and you still won't let me go.”

Yusaku opens his mouth again, that desperate cry leaving him just like before with no other sound, He wants to explain himself, let him know Yusaku only wants the best for him, but he can't. He's physically unable to do so, right when he feels like he needs it the most, and panic rises in his throat as Ryoken just stares at him waiting for an answer.

“What do you want from me, Yusaku?” He begs, leaning in closer until their breaths are mingling together, their noses almost brushing against each others. This just makes Yusaku fidget uncomfortably, bile rising in his throat at rapid speed as Ryoken seems to lean even closer—“What more do you need from me? You already have everything—

Yusaku wakes up with a choked off scream on his lips and cold sweat running down his back. His laptop is almost dangling off his lap to the floor, a video on how to make bakery-quality blueberry muffins playing, his TV still on. His heart is, of course, racing, and he can tell he's five seconds away from hyperventilation or another panic attack, so he sits up and places his laptop on the coffee table, all but running to bathroom to dry heave against the toilet and cough out his lungs, the dream fresh in his mind. Just thinking about it brings him back in a much more realistic manner than it should be possible, the flat line indicating that Kogami was truly dead that day echoing across his mind, the desperate edge of Ryoken's voice disgusting him beyond belief.

He feels guilty, he realizes, about breaking down in front of him, about putting that image in his mind to add to Ryoken's already huge and ever-growing guilt complex, because he complicated things. He shouldn't be feeling this way, because his panic attacks, the things that trigger him—he can't control that, he knew what he was getting into when he opened those video files, and Ryoken did as well, warned him about them, and he still made that decision, they both decided to take that risk and were paying for it greatly. But still, how can he shake all of these feelings off? Dream Ryoken had a point, Yusaku's been asking for more than what he could give all this time, hiding a small but bigger than it should be amount of selfishness behind his worry over what will become of him as the situation with the Ignises develops. He's already taken so much—his home, his father, his safety, and now he dares to ask for his future despite Ryoken believing there isn't one for him.

It doesn't mean that Yusaku is wrong—he isn't, Ryoken truly does need to get his shit together, so to speak, about his feelings regarding the Ignises, his father, Yusaku, his role as the leader of the Knights of Hanoi and everything in between, but it means he's overstepping more often than he should. That isn't quite right either—Ryoken needs a push in the right direction, but it still makes Yusaku feel so, so guilty over it, and there's nothing he can do to fix this mess. He could call him, ask him to meet, and then what? Have a duel, talk it out? They were both too stubborn for that, from head to toe, stubbornness was what kept the both of them going for all

these years, and it was quickly proving to be an obstacle in their developing relationship, messing with their heads.

In the end, Yusaku just sat on his bathroom floor for an undefined amount of time, willing nausea and the shivers away until he could stand and go back to the living room. He takes one look at himself before doing so in the mirror and cringes at the dark bags under his eyes, the paleness of his skin, how messy and uncared for his hair seemed. No wonder that cashier looked like she was about to call the police on him, then.

After all that coughing he did, Yusaku felt just about ready to knock down all of his cold medicine in one cocktail but didn't. He knew very well about the possible consequences of doing that as well as he did about those of the sleeping pills. So instead, he just got some more coffee ready that made him shiver in mild disgust, upsetting his stomach but settling down once it realized Yusaku was going to keep drinking it anyway. It's possible that he will eventually throw up from this, but right now he can't get himself to care as he settles in his couch again and reaches for his laptop. It's about three-thirty am, which means he slept for about an hour and still has at least four and a half more to go before he feels safe enough to sleep.

He settles in for the long haul.

About five hours later, Yusaku literally jumps out of his seat when he hears his door being aggressively banged against the wall and footsteps approaching, on his feet and ready to tail it out through the window in a second when his brain finally processes the image before him and his mouth drops open in shock.

He can't even verbally express his surprise at seeing Takeru barge into his apartment, holding Yusaku's spare key in his hand and his baggage in the other, gasping for breath and shaking snow out of his body like a dog, because he's still going non-verbal and probably will for a few days, but this doesn't affect his friend at all, it seems, as he drops everything on the floor and steps closer to Yusaku, arms open wide but without actually pulling him in for the hug he's offering.

“Ah, I’m finally here!” Takeru exclaims, giving Yusaku his best smile, and he can barely process something as simple as the YouTube video he was in the middle of, never mind this. “I thought you were going to be asleep by now, but it was that bad, uh?”

Yusaku stares, nodding with wide eyes.

“Well, sorry about dropping in on you like this, I just couldn’t handle the thought of you being alone like that—”

Yusaku makes a wild motion with his hands to get him to stop, flailing his arms around, almost slipping into sign language right away, but seeing as Takeru is still barely grasping the basics he can’t rely on that yet. Instead, with his attention on him now, Yusaku takes a deep breath and then starts to slowly finger spell his way through a question, only to stop halfway to go close the door, snow starting to slip in.

“You were gonna ask me what am I doing here?” Takeru asks. He failed to properly take off his shoes before scaring the shit out of Yusaku, so they are lying on the entrance discarded to the side instead of right beside Yusaku’s own. He certainly isn’t acting like he just came home from his traditional Japanese family, and Yusaku nods in response to his question.

“Well, I checked the train hours and saw that there was one leaving very early and bought a last minute ticket. The seating was awful, but it wasn’t a long trip, lucky me,” Yusaku starts shaking his hand, finger spelling for him to answer properly to his question. “I said I didn’t want you to be alone, and it’s technically not Christmas anymore, so here I am! I knew you weren’t going to talk to Kusanagi-san or call me if things got bad, so... here I am?”

“*Are you staying over, then?*” Yusaku spells, and Takeru blinks as this processes in his brain.

“Actually, I just came to say hi and warm up since your place is closer to the station— do you still have that peanut butter I left in here?” Yusaku nods. “Great, so, I was not going to stay, but I’m definitely doing so now.”

“*Why?*” This signs Takeru knows, his eyes brightening in recognition.

“Because you look like you haven’t had a proper night of sleep in who knows how long— go to bed, I’ll keep watch.”

Watch for what? Yusaku almost asks, but he knows what Takeru means. He was almost ready to go to bed, either way, the sun starting to rise from the outside, and his presence, despite how thunderous it was, helped sooth his remaining nerves as Takeru grabbed him lightly by the shoulders and guided him to his room. He dragged his feet all the way there, the adrenaline of the scare making him feel as tired as he probably was in reality, and before he can even process most of what’s happening, Takeru has already tucked him in and turned off the lights, the sounds of him settling on his couch audibly through the paper thin walls.

Yusaku eventually falls asleep to his loud snoring.

When he finally wakes up after Takeru decided to break into his apartment, it’s so early into the 26th that he’s embarrassed about just how many hours he spent sleeping the previous day, doing nothing. Takeru stayed all day to look over him and make sure he would be fine once he woke up, making use of his kitchen – which meant eating everything he’s left on his fridge before during his past visits – and his TV to entertain himself, bickering with Flame all the while. Taking a shower is a chore, and he still isn’t feeling any better than he was earlier, but at least he’s got clean clothes and isn’t that disgusting anymore.

He found an ugly bruise on his side that resulted from his fall when he hopped into the shower, and his arm was also sporting some markings from Ryoken’s iron grip. He traced them absentmindedly, fingers pressing into the uneven blue-ish blemish on his skin in quiet and perhaps a bit morbid fascination. If he could have his way, Ryoken would never find out about these, but he probably already carried a suspicion about it when he left— you can only pretend you weren’t grabbing onto someone’s arm with a ridiculous amount of strength without expecting it to bruise for so long.

Kicking those thoughts out of his mind, Yusaku cooks dinner for the both of them, American style instant pancakes that Takeru bought a few weeks back and stored in his fridge for emergencies that were absolutely awful— for

him, at least, because Takeru actually made some good use of the peanut butter, but he could barely stomach any food. It was a wonder that he hasn't thrown up his meal from his outing with Ryoken yet, and he hoped it would stay that way.

"I need to buy some balm..." Yusaku whispers halfway through their meal, voice coming back to him by bit the longer he stayed awake. Takeru glances up from stuffing his mouth and raises an eyebrow in question, so Yusaku gestures vaguely towards his side. "I fell to the floor earlier."

It's here that he remembers he made a promise to himself about letting Takeru know about the real nature of his relationship with Ryoken, so he quietly begins the retelling of the important details once he manages to catch his attention away from his TV for long enough, starting with the three things mantra and finishing with the events of the 24th, including his reaction to his breakdown.

"Wait, so, when you called me—"

"He was here, yes. He never left until after..." Yusaku swallows, looking down at what was left of his distasteful pancakes, moving them around with his fork. "Well, you know now."

"I— Well, I'm sorry, I feel like I should be insulted by how you kept this from me for so long," Takeru frowns, and Yusaku winces at the frankness of his words. He notices though and shoots him a reassuring smile, one of his hands dropping down on Yusaku's shoulder. "I mean, I should, but I'm actually kind of... not?"

Yusaku blinks. "You aren't?"

"Look, I can see why you would be a bit wary about telling me this stuff—it's awfully personal, and I don't have the best temper when faced with things I can't understand," Takeru sighs, dropping his fork on top of his pancakes, so Yusaku knows this is serious. He thinks back at his no-result duel with Ryoken and has to agree, shrugging with one shoulder. "I'm glad you told me, though. It's not... easy to accept the fact that you've got the hots for a cyber-terrorist—"

“That I what,” Yusaku asks, but there’s no inflection to his voice so it falls flat. Takeru stares at Yusaku and Yusaku stares back, both in apparent confusion. Nervously, Takeru starts to look around, much like a caged animal would and Flame coughs awkwardly from somewhere in the room. “What do you mean by that?”

“Uh, nothing!” He exclaims and suddenly shoots up on his feet, taking his plate and the now empty peanut butter container away. Yusaku follows him closely with a critical eye. “Anyways, how do you think Ai’s going to take being locked in a drawer for two days?”

Yusaku glances up at the ceiling, frowning, and nods when he comes up with an answer: “He’s going to be absolutely insufferable.”

A few hours later, Yusaku confirms this once he meets up with Kusanagi-san to go back to work at Café Nagi. Kusanagi-san had a very nice Christmas, spent most of his 24th and 25th on the hospital with Jin, giving his nurses a helping hand and bonding with the families of other patients. He’s not happy to hear about how Yusaku’s Christmas went, seems actually quite upset about how his meeting with Ryoken turned out, but all of this gets overshadowed as soon as he opens Café Nagi’s desk drawer, where he left his Duel Disk.

“About fucking time!” It’s the first thing out of Ai’s mouth, his humanoid form shaking his little fist at him with one hand and making a crude gesture with the other. His nonexistent mouth is pulled into a frown, equally invisible eyebrows furrowed, and Takeru tries to hide his laughter on his fist with little success. “This is the last time I ever do anything nice for you, I swear! I set you up with your maniac of a special person and this is how I get thanked! Good thing I’m not stuck in here anymore or I would have deleted myself out of boredom!”

“Relax,” Yusaku says, rolling his eyes. “Did you actually went into the network by yourself?”

“Of course not! I just entertained myself by watching some videos. I think I know how to cook now,” Ai brings his hand up to his chin, tilting his head to the side in thought. Kusanagi-san was grinning from his place heating up

the grill, and Takeru was still struggling to not laugh in his face, fingers pressed over the mute button on his own Duel Disk so Flame would not interfere. “Tell me, how’s Roboppy doing? She better not be ahead of me on our show now—”

“Keep quiet, will you? It couldn’t have been that bad,” Yusaku interrupts, and Ai glares at him. “Besides, you’re giving yourself too much credit, assuming I had a perfect couple of days.”

“Oh? What happened!? You look even more annoyed than usual!” Ai probes, expression morphing into one of curiosity. Takeru sees himself out of the truck to help Kusanagi-san set up the tables for the day, still snickering in his fist. “Did something juicy happen and I missed it? Ah, you need to take me to Roboppy immediately!”

“What happened it’s none of your business,” Yusaku snaps, wrapping his Duel Disk around his wrist. Despite how annoyed he is by principle with Ai, he actually doesn’t want to leave him behind again— it was too dangerous to do so, he had been too reckless with that slip-up. “You can catch up with Roboppy after my shift is over.”

“Your whole shift!?”

Yusaku blocks him out after that, focusing on work to clear his mind from the events of the last two days. It’s not an easy task, so he asks Kusanagi-san to let him handle the grill so he wouldn’t have to focus on his running thoughts, and it mostly works. His cold, while still very present, is mercifully not strong enough to render him useless yet, and he spends most of the day knocking back his medicine once enough time passes for the effects to have faded. His nose is not really that bad, but the physical pain is already setting in, and paired with the bruise on his side it’s extremely distracting.

Once the day it’s over though, Kusanagi-san is kind enough to give Yusaku and Takeru a ride close to his apartment, dropping them off at the same pharmacy Yusaku went to the other night for them to make their way from there so Yusaku could restock in some medicine and buy a few other things he needed, like soap and shampoo, as well as that ointment, and he accepts

Takeru's request to split the bill because he snuck a ridiculous amount of sweets in his cart when he wasn't looking.

The walk to his apartment is full of soft conversation, Ai and Flame commenting here and there, but Yusaku gets restless when they get to his house and he drops Ai off with Roboppy, who is really happy to see him. Takeru notices and tries to get him to cheer up by making him watch the highlights of the Link VRAINS Christmas event with him – most of them were related to Blue Angel, to no one's surprise – but he can barely process much about it beyond just how boring it looked for the actual participants, including him.

He determines it's just his insomnia when Takeru's head falls on his shoulder in the middle of yet another duel against Blue Angel, a chocolate bar held between his fingers. Despite being tired from work and just the emotional stress he's been through, he finds that he can't close his eye for more than a few seconds without feeling like he's suddenly jolting awake, not even the warm coming from Takeru soothing him enough to go to sleep, so eventually he just gives up and picks up the trash around them, careful to not wake him.

So, seeing as sleeping will be impossible, Yusaku decides to bake instead.

He gets about halfway done with the cookie batter when his mind starts wandering back to Ryoken, and more specifically, his nightmare about him. It still brings goosebumps to his skin to think about it, makes his limbs feel numb and his center cold, his hands clumsy as he grabs some eggs and almost drops them. He knows this is just the same sequels he gets after his nightmares, insomnia and the general restlessness, but the fact that the dream wasn't his usual material and struck closer to something that Yusaku was much more deeply afraid of in the present than he was of the horrors of his past is really messing with his head, the headaches that come with the cold he's still not sure he will completely fall into not helping.

He doesn't even realize that Ai is watching him until he happens to glance up and finds him standing over the counter, arms crossed, his Duel Disk probably dropped there by Roboppy at some point. It would have made him

jump had he not been used to Ai trying to scare him like this, but it does give him pause.

“What are you staring at?” Yusaku asks, frowning. Ai looks strangely serious, which is usually not a good sign.

“Roboppy told me all about how your date went,” Ai begins, sitting down on top of the Duel Disk and bringing one hand up to his chin, voice mischievous. Yusaku, despite being very good at not letting Ai get the best of him, can feel himself flushing red at the word ‘date’, and is tempted to hit that mute button, perhaps lock him in a drawer again. “Christmas lunch, uh?”

“I told you it’s none of your business. Stop being nosy,” Yusaku shakes his head, looking back down at the cookie batter. He’s going to need more flour. “Go bother Flame.”

“Flame isn’t any fun though! And besides, I want to know all about how your date went,” Ai giggles, somehow managing to make his face look suggestive without having any features, and the blush refuses to leave his face. To his displeasure, Ai notices. “Look! You’re even blushing like a maiden!”

“Ai, *shut up*. First of all, it was not a date,” Yusaku almost drops a broken egg, crust and all, into the floor in his fury, but he manages to grab it in time, keeping it from falling into it. “Second, I have told you twice already I don’t want to talk about it—”

“Here comes the third!”

“— and third, you shouldn’t be using Roboppy as a spy. She doesn’t know any better,” Yusaku shakes his head, grabbing his whisker from the counter. He should get a kitchen assistant because baking by hand was getting really old really fast. “And it’s also an invasion of my privacy.”

“What do you want me to do!? You left me locked in a drawer!” He grumbles, and Yusaku comes very close to throwing some cookie batter at him to get him to shut up, but it would probably accomplish nothing except

riling him up further and staining his floor. Damn it. “She also told me your evening didn’t end very well—”

Yusaku, in a show of restraint, doesn’t grab his Duel Disk and throws it across the room. Instead, he beats the cookie batter with much more aggressiveness than he needs to and clenches his jaw, voice tight when he interrupts Ai’s words. “I don’t want to talk about it. It’s fine.”

Ai seems to deflate slightly, which is weird. “Are you sure, Yusaku-chan? You know I didn’t want that to happen, right? I just wanted you to have a nice day for once.”

“I know that, Ai, and I appreciate your worry...” Yusaku drifts off, looking down at his batter. He really does need more flour, because it’s too watery even though he didn’t use any milk. That butter was too soft, it seems. “...but it’s ok, these things happen. It’s not like I was expecting much to change either way.”

“Ah, but you can’t just give up like that!” Ai exclaims as Yusaku turns in hopes of finding more flour somewhere in his cupboards, shaking his head as he listens with one ear. “You know, I don’t really like Revolver, he’s a bit more murderous towards me than I’d like, but at least he manages to get something out of you!”

“It doesn’t matter when he’s the one that doesn’t understand—” Yusaku starts, almost mumbling the words to himself, but Ai cuts him off almost frantically.

“None of that, Yusaku-chan. If he doesn’t understand, then you have to make him!” Yusaku turns, just in time to see Ai slam his fist down on his open palm, frowning in thought. It’s a ridiculous image, because Ai is just a hologram, really, but he looks more real than Yusaku himself is feeling. “He did find the Cyberse, so he can’t be that much of an idiot to let a beauty like you go!”

“Stop complimenting me,” Yusaku grumbles, bends down to look in his lower cupboards, and sighs with relief when he finds one unopened bag of

flour. Perhaps praying is not as useless as he's found it. "Also, it's not that easy. Ryoken is stubborn—"

"But so are you. If there's anyone that can get him to see the light, it's you, Playmaker!"

Despite himself, Yusaku can't help but grin at Ai's support, and hides it beneath his hand so he wouldn't see it and call him out on it. "Since when are you a cheerleader?"

This makes a bunch of protests Yusaku is not listening to sprout out of Ai's mouth, and he finally finishes the cookie batter. He prepares one tray to get into the oven first, because he only has one and his oven is small, then leans against the counter as he waits for them to be ready, thinking about Ai's encouragement. He had a point, Yusaku has to admit, about him being the only one able to make him realize things he's been denying to himself, and about him not having to give up so easily to get Ryoken to understand what he means to him and fix things.

Still, it would be difficult, and Yusaku has no idea where to start with this. Ryoken would probably not answer to his texts or calls, at least not how he wanted him to, with that air of familiarity they had come to adapt to during the day they spent together, and it would be even harder to get him to come to him unless he had something he wanted regarding Lighting or SOL, but Yusaku wasn't going to touch those video files ever again if he could help it, and he was sure Ryoken's lieutenants would manage to go through them much quicker than they were able to.

With a sigh, Yusaku runs his hand through his face, frustrated. He has no option but to wait for Ryoken to come to him, it seemed.

Well, he thinks, here's to hoping.

Almost a week passes after his panic attack before Yusaku hears anything from Ryoken.

Well, this is a lie—he hears from him, but it's Revolver and Playmaker who do the talking. Revolver once again leaves one of those weird cards calling for a meeting on the hotdog truck without them realizing *when* he was there, and they didn't even find out about that until Kusanagi-san called very early in the morning, panicked after having found the card on the passenger seat. There's an unspoken tension in the air when they come across each other face to face in a secluded area of Link VRAINS to discuss the findings Hanoi's made, and it makes Ghost Girl and Blue Maiden look at them with some confusion.

He supposes it's not really his fault that they were forced to interact again barely three days after—well, after *that* happened, because finding out that Hanoi figured out a way to track down Lighting was a big deal that needed to be discussed as soon as possible. Yusaku will admit, he was not expecting to see the remnants of the old Link VRAINS and what was left of the Tower of Hanoi, or to agree to reactivate it without that much hassle, but this is just how things were, he thought, as he accepted the pieces of the program they needed to complete.

Takeru, who was filled in with everything literally the previous day, kept quiet through most of this meeting, taking in the news and only talking when he felt necessary, glancing between the two of them like he was expecting something horrible to happen. Yusaku couldn't blame him, as he was also wary of what could develop during this meeting, but in the end, all they did was fall into an agreement to reactive the Tower of Hanoi, and that was it.

Yusaku's fully recovered ability to speak wasn't really that useful when he felt like there was sand in his mouth every time he meet Revolver's eyes. There was no sign to indicate what he was feeling throughout the meeting, no twitch of his mouth, no frantic movement of his eyes, no implications about their afternoon spent together spoken. It was as if the events of the 24th never happened and Yusaku—he didn't like this at all. He didn't like the coolness of his gaze and the sharp edge of his voice when he dared, as Playmaker and in front of everyone, remind him about working towards a new future together, only for Revolver to repeat those same words he said back at the restaurant: '*I'll keep it in mind.*'

Yusaku does not fool himself into thinking this was a sign or even made or purpose—they were just words to let him know that much hasn't changed, Ryoken was still going to be working to achieve the goals of Hanoi while letting the idea of not destroying the Ignises sit in the backburner of his mind. It was extremely frustrating, and he suspected that Ryoken disabled facial animation to avoid making a mistake and giving Yusaku what he wanted: proof that they hadn't taken two steps forwards but five backward.

This, of course, brings Yusaku to the current situation.

“You haven’t finished the program yet?” Ryoken asks, and Yusaku, who was innocently attending the grill, dedicated to getting the order handed to him by Takeru right, almost jumps out of his skin. He looks up sharply to see Ryoken leaning casually against the truck’s counter like he’s just waiting for his food, wrapped in the same black coat he wore before and a navy blue scarf. The winter sun has been especially harsh today, so he is not surprised to see him wearing sunglasses as well, but he feels like that is probably just a way to hide from Takeru. “We don’t have that much time, the sooner we deal with it—”

Yusaku glares at him. It’s barely been a day and a half.

“I know,” he snaps, and Ryoken’s teeth click together loudly from how hard and fast he is to close his mouth shut. He almost feels guilty about it, but this new and simultaneously familiar feeling of misplaced anger and frustration drains the fight right out of him despite his attempts to cling to it. “We’re still working on it, but we’re close. It’ll be ready within the next couple of days.”

“Your buns are burning,” Ryoken points out casually, and Yusaku looks down to the grill to note that he’s not lying. He hurries to get the bread out of the fire and onto a plate and starts to painfully slowly assemble the order. Kusanagi-san was very specific with his instructions and Yusaku always followed them with detail, not wanting to be the cause of the food truck getting bad reviews. If only Takeru could cook. “Keep me updated on your progress, our part is already done.”

“Is that it?” Yusaku shakes his head, looking down at the hotdog he’s trying to not fuck up. He’s immediately disappointed with himself when he registers just how bitter his voice sounds, but at this point, they’re way past pretensions, willing to make an excuse when in their avatars—or at least, he hoped they were. “Perhaps you should be more worried about Ghost Girl’s progress, considering how much you dislike her work—”

“Hey, Yusaku! Is that order ready yet!?” Takeru calls, running up to the truck holding a tray with trash and leftovers, and he watches as Ryoken’s posture tenses up like a snake ready to strike. Oh no.

Takeru stops in front of the truck, dumping the tray’s contents on the trashcan and sighing, wiping the sweat off his brow. The weather is still cold enough to get Yusaku to shake even while working the grill, but the human furnace Takeru is apparently kept him warm all the time. If only he could relate. Ryoken tries to pretend he’s not there by turning away from his eyesight, stepping away from the counter but leaning against the side of the truck, which is in no way any better.

“Here you go, let me get their drinks,” Yusaku says, offering Takeru the plate with the hotdogs. He turns around, which is not a good thing, he realizes as soon as Takeru starts talking.

“Hey, are you still bruised? I forgot to ask you before, but that hit you took was nasty—”

“I’m fine,” he hurries to say, trying to not drop the bottle of soda he’s holding from the shock. He was having a really, really bad shift. “It’s healing well.”

This was an almost lie—the bruise he got from his fall was big and almost black, and it had cleared just a little bit over the last few days. He did have to go out and buy some ointment to soothe the pain, as well as get Takeru to help him apply it in places he couldn’t reach, but it was fine as much as he was concerned, which wasn’t a lot. The one on his arm, though—

“What about the other one? Man, that grip he had on you must have been —”

Yusaku turns around quickly and almost slams the sodas onto the counter, but he manages to keep himself in check to appear calm to Takeru. The last thing he wants is a confrontation here of all places between his only, fellow vigilante friend and his cyber-terrorist rival. Takeru seems a bit surprised by the urgency of his movements, but he shrugs it off and turns around with a kind grin, off to take the order to their clients.

“That was certainly something,” Ryoken mumbles, stepping back into his previous position. Yusaku looks at him to find his expression grim, lips pulled into a line of displeasure. His voice is carefully wiped of any emotion when he talks next. “Are you still hurt?”

Oh, so now you care, Yusaku wants to say, but bites his lip to stop himself from doing it. He knows all of the bitterness and anger towards Ryoken is just a side effect of how dejected he felt when he called for that meeting in Link VRAINS, from how it seemed like they never spent any time together during Christmas day, so he doesn’t want to take it out on him. It’s not his fault, or Ryoken’s for that matter, that he’s letting himself be affected by what he should have expected when he allowed him to leave.

He should know better than to grieve for what could have been.

“I said I’m fine,” he says instead, crossing his arms, and quickly uncrossing them once he remembers the location of his bruise. “Is that all you wanted today?”

“Let me see your arm,” Ryoken requests, voice hard as steel and avoiding his question; it’s clear that his slip up allowed him to take a peek at what he did by accident. Yusaku stares down at him, wishing he wasn’t wearing those stupid sunglasses to take a good read at his face, but he refuses to back down easily. Ryoken, noticing this, huffs out a breath in frustration. “Let me see your arm, and then I’ll leave you alone.”

That’s the opposite of what I want, Yusaku thinks, almost cringing at his own thoughts. He needed to get his shit together.

“Fine,” he agrees and turns to step out of the truck. Ryoken meets him by the doors when he opens them, sunglasses pulled up and pushing his fringe

back and out of the way. The sight does something to Yusaku's heart that he does not want to analyze right now, so he brings his arm up to show Ryoken the remaining bruises that his iron grip left on him. They aren't really that bad, and they've faded to a light yellow with some traces of purple with the passing of the days, but it's not a pretty sight.

Ryoken's reaction is not as neutral or positive as Yusaku hoped it would be. Apparently, unlike Yusaku, he does care about the harm done to him.

"I'd like to apologize about this," he says, quietly, voice devoid of any emotion. It's so unlike him that Yusaku almost winces, and he's starting to feel a bit nauseous as he stares at the downturned corners of his mouth. Ryoken reaches out like he's going to touch his arm, but his hand falls about halfway there and he awkwardly clears his throat, looking away. "I shouldn't have—"

"Stop," Yusaku cuts him out, and they both seem to recoil at the desperate edge of his voice, the borderline begging behind his mostly blank expression. It makes Ryoken frown at him, but he continues. "None of this is your fault—"

"Yusaku, with all due respect, we both know I never should have stayed in your home for so long," Ryoken interrupts him, words sharp. His frown deepens as he stares down at Yusaku, his eyes unreadable—he finds that he's quite missing the much more playful attitude he used to have every time he came to Café Nagi, as well as how he behaved during their day together. This, the coldness and the refusal to listen to him, are no pleasant and it makes Yusaku feel like someone is stabbing him through the heart. "I caused this, and I take full responsibility."

"If you would just listen to me before shrugging me off—"

"There's nothing left to say, Yusaku. Don't you get it?" Ryoken's voice rises dangerously at his question, and they both look around in paranoia that someone might be listening, but it's obvious that they're alone. Ryoken sighs, eyes dropping to the ground. "I can't do this. I wish that, for your sake, you would stop trying to make me think otherwise—it's going to lead

you nowhere. I have a duty to fulfill, and I can't keep running away from it.”

“Ryoken, don’t—” Yusaku starts, stepping forwards, but in response, he takes a step backward and it feels like rejection. Like he just got slapped. This is worse than before, all of their progress regressing with worrying speed, and there’s nothing he can do about it. But that doesn’t mean he’s not going to keep trying, Ai’s encouragement from the other night filling his head. “If you would just listen to me—”

“I’ve done enough *listening*. This is for the best,” Ryoken shakes his head, stressing his words, and Yusaku can only stare as his eyes harden and he pulls down his sunglasses, taking another step back. “I’ll see you around... Playmaker.”

Yusaku’s only thought as he watches Ryoken turn and walk away from him, disappearing into the crowd, is simple and the words come easily, filling him with determination even as he feels like he would be justified in falling to his knees in despair. He repeats them in his head, and just for the sake of it, because the situation demands it, starts by listing his goals in three, the old pattern soothing him:

1. He needs to fix this, to clear up any misconceptions Ryoken may have about how Yusaku feels about their little incident.
2. He needs to make his intentions about their relationship clear, to let him know he will never make him change or feel ashamed about his love for his father, even though Yusaku despises him.
3. Finally, he needs to finish that program—he was positive that Ryoken would no answer to his calls unless he had something to show for it.

They were just the beginnings of a plan he would need to think long and hard about, but it would have to do. He has something to accomplish now.

7. Chapter 7

Notes for the Chapter:

Final part. Fun fact: I made myself sad several times writing this monster until I reached the end... so you can take that as a little spoiler :)

Over the next couple of days, Yusaku spends very little time sleeping and a lot of time working on the Tower of Hanoi program. He's not proud of it—considering just how sick he is, or rather, how close he is to fall into a serious fever, he shouldn't push it like that, but he's determined to finish this to have a good excuse to call him.

Takeru is not happy about this, and neither is Ai.

“You know, I don’t think this will help a lot,” he points out over breakfast. Despite Yusaku’s insistence that he’s fine and he should actually go back to his own apartment, Takeru refuses to let him out of his sight. Yusaku would be insulted if he cared about that right now, but he’s too focused on his task to do so.

“How do you know?” He asks instead, looking over at where Roboppy is, very unsuccessfully, trying to get rid of the oven stains. Again. “You’ve barely ever talked to him.”

“I don’t even understand your plan!” Ai exclaims from somewhere under the absolute mess of blankets thrown around the couch. Yusaku made camp on the living room because it was significantly warmer than his bedroom, and Takeru was standing over him, too hot to dive in. He was sort of missing his presence because he could use the body warm, but Takeru seemed to be determined to not give Yusaku what he wants. Ai chimes in again: “You’re really going to give him what he wants to get him to talk to you instead of doing the opposite!?”

“Holding the Tower of Hanoi program hostage would do no one any good. Blackmail like that won’t work on him, and will only bring distrust into our

truce,” Yusaku points out, and Takeru throws his hands up in the air in despair when he immediately grabs a tissue to blow his nose afterward. “This will be far more effective, I’m sure of it.”

“I must admit, it’s a formidable strategy,” Flame says, also lost in the depths of Yusaku’s nest of blankets. He nods gratefully in what he thinks is the direction of his voice. “He won’t be able to say no to a meeting to talk about the program.”

“Talk about it? So you aren’t giving it to him?” Takeru asks, bewildered. Yusaku shrugs. “How does that make any sense!?”

“We agreed that each of us would take our part of the program to Link VRAINS, remember? But if I’m having trouble with the code—”

“Wait, wait, hold on!” Ai begs, somewhere to Yusaku’s left, and he turns to see him peek out from under one of his blankets. “Why are you finishing it then? You just need to tell him you’re having trouble with the code and he will come to help you!”

“It’s because I need to know what’s in here—”

“Wait— you just want to have the upper hand, don’t you!?” Takeru claps his hands together, apparently excited about having figured out his plan. He deflates immediately after, though, frowning in confusion. “I... still don’t get it.”

Yusaku sighs, exasperated. He has not stopped working his way through the program while this discussion spiraled out of control, but he has to admit it would be easier to finish if they were a bit less loud and a lot more helpful. “If you let me explain, perhaps we could get somewhere.”

“Honestly, Takeru, Ai, you ought to be ashamed of your disrespect,” Flame reprimands them, also peeking out from under a blanket. Yusaku wonders in the back of his mind how they are doing that if they’re technically just holograms. “Let the man speak.”

“Thank you, Flame. Now, here’s my plan: the first part consists on finishing the code for the actual program, not just because I need to know what’s in here for this, but also because it will serve us right in the long run once Ghost Girl is done with her part,” Yusaku explains, barely resisting from bringing his hand up to count the steps with his fingers. “The next step is to recreate a part of the program, as in, make a copy, but make a mistake in its programming so the whole thing will fail. This mistake has to be so small it will take a while to decode it, so I need to be very throughout.”

“Won’t they know it’s not their original program, though? They made it, after all,” Ai points out, and Yusaku nods appreciatively at him noticing this.

“If all goes well, the Knights of Hanoi won’t ever get their hands on this copy. This brings me to the third and final part of the plan: text him a picture of the program failing,” Yusaku finishes, fingers still coding away. He could really use Kusanagi-san’s help right about now, but he already did plenty for him last night getting started on the replica. It was *not* easy to convince him to help him. “He will have no choice but to meet me to tell me where the mistake is.”

The room stands in silence for about five seconds, the only sounds being those of Roboppy’s scrubbing and Yusaku’s fingers on the keyboard. Then, taking a deep breath, Takeru falls beside him on top of the blanket nest, expression devoid of any emotion.

“All this work just to text him a picture?” He whispers, and Yusaku sighs again. He knows it’s a lot, but it’s either this or nothing in his mind. If they were normal people, perhaps they could just find a way to meet up without Yusaku having to pull all-nighters and knock down so much medicine his head feels a bit fuzzy and his eyes heavy, as well as drink so much coffee his hands are shaking, but they aren’t and he’s never been able to do things lightly, so he was not about to start now.

“Yes,” Yusaku confirms, reaching out blindly with his right hand for his mug and almost slapping Takeru in the face instead. “But I’ll be worth it. Once I get him alone—”

“He’ll have no choice but to listen!” Ai finishes for him, voice right behind Yusaku’s ear. Really, how are he and Flame even moving around? “Go, Yusaku-chan! I believe in you!”

“I admire your resilience, Playmaker,” Flame nods, giving him a thumbs up that Yusaku appreciates.

“I don’t think we should be supporting this behavior!” Takeru looks about two seconds away of tearing his hair out. “This is madness.”

“Look at the bright side,” Yusaku shrugs, reaching for another tissue and actually hitting Takeru in the face this time by accident. “You won’t have to do any work.”

Takeru groans in despair.

Yusaku finishes the faulty copy of the Tower of Hanoi program around one-thirty am, having finished the actual program around eleven. It turns out that knowing his way around it made it much easier than trying to recreate it by eye, and a lot more so when you could just copy paste the more complicated things. The mistake he put in was so small, a simple source in the code that he changed the name of so it would scream “error” at him when he tried to modify some of its pieces, that he often forgot about it as he copied the rest of the program in. He was proud of himself, because, for all that it was a bit hurried, it looked almost flawless, like this was made by the same people who developed the Tower—if it weren’t for the mistake he put in, of course

Takeru, worried as he was about Yusaku’s sanity, is sleeping soundly on the couch while he stretches out his fingers, hands stiff from so much typing in the cold air of the room. His insomnia from a few nights ago seemed to have finally given up on keeping him awake, so, very slowly, Yusaku stands up and stumbles back into his room, diving face first into his bed and falling asleep as soon as his head touches the pillow.

Curiously, Yusaku doesn’t have any nightmares that night—sure, Takeru’s snoring might be keeping his subconscious at ease, but when it’s not

nightmares, Yusaku tends to rarely dream about anything else, and this is not the case for tonight. It's not really a memorable dream— in the morning, he could barely recall the feeling of soft fabric against his fingers and a flash of grey and white, but it leaves an impression on him as he thinks it over coffee, putting him in a good mood.

Despite his urgency with the program, Yusaku doesn't put his plan into motion right away. It's December 31st today, and Kusanagi-san invited them over to stay late at Café Nagi and watch the fireworks of the New Year from Den City's plaza. Yusaku would have probably said no if the events of the last year hasn't pushed the three of them together closely, but it's with great laziness that he actually gets dressed to go out, borrowing one of Takeru's sweaters that he doesn't use or need because his own is dirty and he needs the warm more than he does.

Ai insists that they take Roboppy with them and Flame agrees with him, so they are forced to board the train carrying a cheery and talkative Roboppy in between them. It's a miracle they don't get stopped before they reach the plaza, and Kusanagi-san's face, when they show up, says a thousand words, but he doesn't question it.

“Hot dogs?” He offers instead, and Takeru almost drops Roboppy on his hassle to accept one. Yusaku is much calmer as the day progresses that he's been the whole week, the volume of people actually stopping by to buy a hotdog not that overwhelming as it was without Takeru here to help. He finds himself feeling content, almost terrifyingly so, but just like before, just like every time he finds himself close to happy with his life even if it's not ideal, he feels like there's something missing, and his mind goes back to Ryoken, how tense he looked when he showed up the other day, how carefully manufactured his cool exterior seemed, how it almost cracked under the pressure of Yusaku's insistence.

He wonders what are the Knights of Hanoi doing for the New Year, if they even celebrate it or if they will just treat it as another day, but most of all, he wonders if Ryoken also feels as lonely as he usually did, surrounded by people but with something missing. Yusaku is not naïve enough to think that Ryoken might just be missing him— he lost his father this year as well,

and it most certainly was because of the choices both of them made, so, even though Yusaku hates the guy to bits, he knows it must not be easy.

Once the night falls and Kusanagi-san gives them more hotdogs, they sit in the table to people watch, talking about whatever comes to mind but mostly, and for Takeru's displeasure, about how well-crafted the Tower of Hanoi program is and how amazing it must be to see the whole code— after all, they just got a piece of it, and it's clear that Hanoi spent years developing it and probably testing it before they were sure their weapon of mass destruction would work. The program, with the new modifications Revolver had instructed them to do, was not nearly as dangerous anymore, the capacity to cause mass genocide no longer useable, but it was still a mighty software that shouldn't be in the wrong hands, and Yusaku believes it isn't— not anymore, at least.

The fireworks show is really nice, lights of all colors lighting up the sky as the clock strikes midnight and people and couples around them start hugging and kissing. Roboppy tries to give Ai a New Year's kiss, to no avail, and Kusanagi-san jokes about slipping some mistletoe in Yusaku's pocket so he would have to interact with other people, getting a snort out of Takeru that almost makes him choke on his food. His favorite firework of the night is a nice, brilliant blue one followed by a green one, but when he says so out loud, Takeru tells him he's too whipped, a comment that Yusaku does not understand at all, and stares at all of them as they laugh about his supposed naivety.

Takeru goes back to his rental instead of entering Yusaku's house once Kusanagi-san drops them off, claiming he has laundry to do and dust to clean, and he doesn't stop him, knowing he's probably just going to try and call his family and friends from his hometown in private. Instead, Yusaku gets inside, letting Roboppy walk ahead of him to turn on the TV, and goes right to his laptop, opening the faulty program.

“Oh, Yusaku-chan, you’re gonna do it right now?” Ai inquiries from his wrist, popping out of the Duel Disk to look closely at the screen. Yusaku takes it off for the sake of having some mobility. “I thought you were going to wait until tomorrow! You know, freshen up to see him?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Ai. It’s not like my appearance matters, and he’s probably awake— people around Den City tend to do yacht parties by the beach, so I doubt that his evening has been peaceful,” Yusaku reaches for his phone in his pocket, unlocking it and opening the camera app. He rarely ever uses his phone’s camera, but then again, he rarely feels such an urgent need to see someone, so this doesn’t feel as weird as it would otherwise. “I just hope he answers.”

“If he doesn’t, we’ll just steal a water bike and go for him,” Ai suggests, nodding as he watches Yusaku take the picture of the error displayed on the screen when Yusaku tried to input a random line of code that should have worked. “It’ll be just as effective.”

Yusaku was inclined to disagree, but the offer was tempting. “We’ll see. What should I say with the picture?”

“Uh, please interact? Code bad.”

“Ai, this is serious,” Yusaku shakes his head, looking down at his phone screen, where he already loaded the photo into the chat. He just needed to send it with an explanation, and then sit back and wait. It occurs to him that this is too similar to a teenager trying to talk to their crush, making his ears heat, and with an undignified huff of breath, Yusaku shrugs. “I’ll just tell him I can’t figure out what I’m doing wrong and to meet me at Stardust Road.”

“Oh, so we’re going to him after all! Interesting!” Ai jumps where he stands in excitement, and Yusaku rolls his eyes at him before typing the message and sending it, ignoring the shaking of his fingers.

“No, *I* am going to meet with him. *You* are going to stay here,” Yusaku talks slowly, like he’s trying to explain something to a child, and Ai gasps, offended. “I’m not having you witness whatever is going to happen.”

“This is bullshit!” Ai grumbles, and Roboppy makes a scandalized sound from where she’s watching the TV, saying something about those being forbidden words. “You wouldn’t even be this motivated if it weren’t for me!”

“I appreciate that, but I like my privacy,” Yusaku rolls his eyes, and then stands up to go look for more medicine from the bathroom, the bottle he took with him today and has been using all week already over. He might even take a nap in his bed, for once, because he’s feeling pretty good with himself. He takes his phone with him and sets it to highest volume setting, as well as turning on the vibration in case he received a response.

Now, to wait.

A call wakes him up from his slumber, and half asleep, Yusaku answers without remembering exactly why he went to bed with his phone in his hand.

“Hello?” He mumbles, trying to blink away the sleep. He only succeeds in making his vision blurry.

“What’s wrong with the program?” Ryoken asks, voice sharp, and Yusaku sits up in a rush, startled and suddenly very awake. Right, *right*, he was not counting on him calling, of all things. “Have you figured out the problem?”

“I don’t know. No,” Yusaku answers the questions in order, clearing his throat. His apartment is dark, but he can hear Roboppy and Ai having a hushed discussion in the living room. “I tried to fix it but claimed it was a source issue, so I couldn’t do anything.”

“A source issue?” Ryoken repeats, voice filled with disbelief. “How?”

“I don’t know. I think we should meet up so you can have a look at it—it’s your program, after all,” Yusaku points out, almost innocently, making his voice shift to fit that uninterested tone Shima always complained about, drawing out his words. “I did suggest meeting in Stardust Road.”

A long-suffering sigh. “I’ll be there in about twenty minutes, then.”

“By yourself, right?” Yusaku can’t help but ask—if the other Knights showed up, he would be cornered and forced to admit his evil plan. Not that

his plan was evil, but still. It would be really embarrassing. Ryoken waits a few seconds in silence before sighing again.

“Sure. I’ll meet you there.” And he hangs up.

That was extremely reminiscent of their last phone call, Yusaku thinks, and the thought makes anxiety rise up in his throat as he stands up and collects his house keys and wallet. He takes his laptop in his bag as well, even though he knows he won’t need it because he needs to keep up the act until he’s face to face with Ryoken and able to exchange more than three words with him. He deeply hopes that he won’t take it the wrong way, even if it’ll probably be a bit explosive at first, but at least he knows to not expect a warm welcome and much less a positive reaction.

Coming out of his bedroom, Ai looks up from where he’s inappropriately whispering close to the microphone that would be Roboppy’s ears, but Yusaku is in too much of a hurry to care.

“I’m heading out, Ai,” Yusaku announces, stopping by his front door to put his shoes and jacket on, shooting him a warning look. “I probably won’t be back until late, so don’t come out of here, don’t call me, if you want something, talk to Roboppy, and *don’t* follow me.”

“Aye, captain!” Ai responds, giving him a salute and falling into suspicious giggles immediately afterward. Yusaku frowns at him until he stops. “Good luck, Yusaku-chan! Hey, Roboppy, tell him what I said to you!”

“Right!” Roboppy seems to gear up, her screen display shifting into a smug looking emoji. “I hope you get laid!”

“Ai!” Yusaku says, eyes widening as the Ignis breaks down in laughter, Roboppy still looking at him with that emoji. It’s uncanny, and he can’t even begin to describe just how angry he is about this. “We’ll talk about this when I get back!”

And with that, Yusaku steps out of his apartment and slams the door closed behind him, heading for the station. He has a mission to take care of.

Stardust Road is as beautiful as ever.

Despite the increased amount of movement around the area from people welcoming the New Year on boats on the water or hosting parties at the beach, the lights were still as hypnotizing as the first time Yusaku had witnessed the phenomenon, colors dancing around as a path to the dark blue sky seemed to open up. Ryoken was nowhere to be seen when he arrived, which was surprising, but he guessed that there wasn't any point to hiding in a boat when you were going to just be parked near-by. It made more sense that he probably had to walk from the inside of the mountain, up his house and then down the walkway's stairs, not that Yusaku had any knowledge of whether his mansion even connected to the mountain like that, or if there was another entrance by water that wasn't by the beach's deck.

The amounts of people around, while bigger than usual, don't make Yusaku feel nervous because he is waiting on Kusanagi-san's usual parking spot, leaning on the railing and staring at Stardust Road with nostalgia despite this being just his second visit, the walkway empty of people because the main attraction for others was the beach itself. Over the months that Hanoi hid under the shadows, Yusaku was tempted to come back here several times if only to stargaze or have a quiet place to think, but he never dared to do so, too conflicted by his feelings towards the Knights, and his feelings about Ryoken in particular, once he learned the truth. Now, of course, with the cold air of December making him regret not bringing another jacket and his laptop weighing down his shoulder, Yusaku is sure of what he wants, as he has tried to prove to Ryoken ever since he came back.

Sighing heavily and watching his breath turn white because of the cold temperature, Yusaku pondered whether he should break into Ryoken's mansion to steal some remaining blankets—if he had any, that's it, because that house's main room what devoid of furniture to the point in which his own place could hold a small, insignificant candle to it. Leaning forward on the railing, Yusaku peeked down in boredom, holding onto it tightly to take a look at the parties going on underneath, see if any of these groups happened to be the Knights of Hanoi—

“Careful,” a voice called, Ryoken appearing behind him and pulling on his jacket, almost giving him a heart attack. “You could fall off.”

Yusaku turns, pressing his back against the railing, to find him looking slightly rumpled and disheveled, his hair not that perfectly put together like it usually is and his clothes a bit wrinkly. He’s wearing the same black coat Yusaku’s seen him in, and standing way too close, looking ahead at Stardust Road instead of directly at Yusaku, his eyes reflecting the brightness of the lights like perfect mirrors. He’s rendered speechless by that sight for a few seconds, blinking in slowly as he takes in the details of his profile, how simultaneously soft but sharp he looked in this light.

“You brought the program?” Ryoken asks, his face turning towards Yusaku, and he swallows nervously, shrugging. Ryoken raises an eyebrow, clearly noticing his unease. “What is it?”

“About that—” Yusaku starts, his voice far weaker than he expected it to be because of his cold and the fact that he woke up from a nap not one hour ago, but he couldn’t really get himself to care, even as he brings his hand up to run across his nose. Ryoken’s eyes catch on the motion, following the sight of Yusaku’s gloveless hand until it disappears back in his pocket. “The program never failed.”

Ryoken’s eyes snap up to his face, frowning. “What?”

“It was a fake I made. I can show you if you want,” Yusaku shrugs, and a gush of wind hits him right in the face, making him shiver. “But not here?”

“I— wait, what do you mean you did a fake?” Ryoken looks as bewildered as Yusaku thought he would be, but he wasn’t angry— yet, and in his book, that was good. “Why would you do that?”

“To get you to talk to me,” Yusaku admits, looking away from his eyes to glance around the plaza. The overhead lights were on, giving the stone a nice effect that mixed well with that coming from Stardust Road itself, so it’s was a pretty sight. But it was too cold. “Can we please do this somewhere else, though? I’m kind of sick—”

“Alright, I just— we can’t stay in the house, it must be as cold as out here,” Ryoken nods, expression closed off hard enough that Yusaku can’t read him, so he has no idea what he might be thinking. “I’ll have to go get the car.”

“Sure,” Yusaku agrees, and stares in confusion at Ryoken as he starts making his way up the stairs. “Where are you going?”

Ryoken does not stop walking. “Where did you think I got that car? Wait here, it won’t take long.”

Uh, Yusaku thinks, blinking at his retreating back as Ryoken climbed up the stairs to his home. He never wondered where Ryoken got that car from, just accepting as fact that he... has one. How curious.

True to his words, Ryoken reappears not ten minutes later, pulling in the plaza with the same car Yusaku saw him with the other day, opening the passenger door for him from the inside. Yusaku only hesitates for a second before getting in, closing the door softly and settling in the seat. The heater is already on, and Ryoken took off his outer coat, showcasing a red and black flannel over the black shirt he was wearing underneath, and Yusaku has to admire how he seemed to completely change the colors he wears with the season. He almost feels inadequate in the same worn brown coat he’s had for years, especially when he notices the fancy, warm looking gloves resting on the key holder. It’s not jealousy, he reasons, but rather the feeling that he’s not enough of a person to even stand beside Ryoken sometimes.

“Now, what were you saying about creating a fake program?” Ryoken probes, looking attentively at the road and not glancing at Yusaku once. He stares at his profile, trying to identify any emotion in there, but he mostly just seems... tired. He’s surprised about this because he expected Ryoken to be pulling through his own feelings with cold efficiency, but it appeared that was not the case.

“Well, I wanted to speak with you face to face, but I realized it wouldn’t be easy to convince you to stay long enough to listen to me,” Yusaku starts, talking almost hesitantly. Ryoken doesn’t have an obvious reaction to his

words, but Yusaku does notice the way his hands clench tightly around the steering wheel the more he talks. “Which is why I finished the program and then replicated it to insert a mistake that would make it fail so I could send you that picture and ask you to meet up.”

“*What?*” Ryoken exclaims, not angrily, but definitely baffled. It would be funny if it weren’t for the narrowing of his eyes and the downturned corners of his lips. “You did all of that only so I would come to you? While sick? *Are you mad?*”

“It was the only way. Or would you have shown up to my house if I just invited you over?” Yusaku retorts, crossing his arms. Ryoken opens his mouth and then closes it, his frown deepening. “That’s what I thought.”

“What did you want to talk about, then?” Ryoken shakes his head in disbelief, sighing heavily. Now that Yusaku’s getting used to seeing him up close again, he can tell that he really does look exhausted even though the lighting inside the car is limited, his eyes not as sharp as they usually are. Yusaku wonders if he looked the same when he appeared at Café Nagi and just never noticed because of the sunglasses and his still bitter feelings. “It must be important.”

Yusaku turns his body completely towards him, and Ryoken glances over for a second before turning back towards the road. He’s probably not going to like this. “It’s about what happened on the 24th.”

Ryoken’s expression turns sour. “I already told you it isn’t worth it—”

“I’d like you to just listen to me for once,” Yusaku snaps at him, frowning. Ryoken bites his bottom lip in frustration, and Yusaku stares at it for a second too long before continuing. “I feel like every time we have a discussion you just change the subject or find a way to weasel your way out of the conversation, so what I say to you never seems to stick, and I’m sick of it.”

“Well, maybe if you understood that I’m not ready to change my whole lifestyle because of you—”

Yusaku takes in a sharp breath at that, feeling like the words struck just the right place in his heart to make it shake in pain. He looks away from Ryoken so he won't see his expression, but he thinks he fails because of the way Ryoken's words stop just as quickly as they came. It's not the meaning of the words themselves that hurt him, but the fact that this is exactly what he feared, what his nightmare from a few nights ago was all about and it's mostly that that scares him, the idea that's he has been forcing Ryoken into something he doesn't want to be.

Silence fills the car and Yusaku doesn't feel quite ready to look back at him, so instead, he focuses on the outside only to realize that they're heading downtown, where all the tourist-oriented shops are. He stares out the window, trying to guess where they might be headed just like he did when they were going to have lunch, but he isn't really that familiar with this side of town so eventually gives up, just to stare ahead until the silence becomes too much.

“Where are we going?” Yusaku asks, his voice a low rumble that almost gets lost within the murmur of the radio. “I don't recognize these shops.”

“I thought you might want to have this conversation in a place that wasn't so crowded or uncomfortable,” Ryoken explains, pressing his lips together awkwardly before sighing again, bringing a hand up to run it through his hair. He sounds as tired as he looks when he talks, frustration winning over any pretenses he might have tried to hold into. “Perhaps over coffee?”

Yusaku agrees, and then takes a deep breath, trying to calm down. He can't let his emotions get in the middle of this conversation, since it may be his only chance and perhaps even his last to knock some sense into Ryoken's head, to help him get some of the weight of his guilt off his back so he wouldn't end up doing more harm than good. This wasn't about the Ignises anymore, but rather about getting some of their misconceptions about each other clear. In all of their conversations, despite how honest they were, things always got left unsaid and up to interpretation, and it was the reason why this rift between them existed right now; neither of them was able to be true to themselves after Yusaku winded down from his panic attack and choose to swallow down their words, letting the other assume whatever they wanted.

Everything would be so much easier if they didn't insist on dancing around each other this way.

The café Ryoken takes them to it's more of a dinner, to be completely honest. There's a record player with an 'out of service' sign, Christmas decorations that look ancient, the booths are made of leather and brightly lit with small lamps that Yusaku hopes they can turn off, and it smells like French fries from the moment they walk in, the bright blue color of the walls faded until it just looks mostly grey. All in all, it's so western that it makes Yusaku think he just stepped into another country by mistake, but Ryoken just strides forwards, neither of them bothering to take off their coats, and grabs the table that's further away from the rest of the scarce customers there are, most of them businessmen in tight suits that looked about ready to pass out on their food. He doesn't trust this establishment. There was no one behind the counter except for a waitress that didn't even look up from filing her nails when they walked in.

"Black coffee, right?" Ryoken asks, and he looks even worse under the white light of the dinner, his skin a bit pale and his eyes with dark circles underneath. Yusaku wonders if he looks twice as bad as he does, and determines it's likely. "No sugary things?"

"No," Yusaku shakes his head, and Ryoken turns to go order from the waitress, but Yusaku takes his arm to grab his attention, sighing deeply. "Ask for the whole pot of coffee if you can."

Ryoken scrunches up his nose, probably thinking about having to watch Yusaku chug down a whole pot of black coffee, but only nods as a response. Yusaku sits down on the table, cringing at the squeaky sounds of the seat, and leans forward on top of it with his arms, bringing his hand up to his chin, thinking about what his next move will be now that they're talking. It's clear that the first thing that needs to be addressed is his panic attack, to clear up what happened— Yusaku has a suspicion that Ryoken blames himself for it as much as he does, and that would just... not cancel itself out, unfortunately.

He stares out the window as he waits for Ryoken to come back, watching as snow slowly starts to fall outside, the table's lamp making him squint. The

weather did not fare well for him at all, considering he barely grabbed his jacket in his hurry, and his apartment was sure to freeze over; Yusaku decides that he will call his landlord in the morning, because he can't keep sleeping wrapped in so many blankets he can barely move in them. Glancing at the hideous, way too bright lamp on the table, Yusaku slips under it and unplugs it with a frown, sighing in relief when he comes back up and the light isn't making him develop a headache anymore.

“Here you go,” Ryoken comes back to the table, a whole pot of steaming hot black coffee in one hand and his own mug of what is undoubtedly milky clear coffee in the other. He has an empty mug precariously balanced on the same hand he’s holding his own coffee with, so Yusaku reaches to grab it before an accident happens. “I had to practically do everything myself, the service here is abysmal.”

“It’s New Year’s Day,” Yusaku shrugs, serving himself his cup as Ryoken settles in front of him. “Also, you’re the one that picked this place—”

“I know, I know,” Ryoken shakes his head, taking a sip from his coffee, lids heavy and almost obscuring the blue of his eyes completely. He looks absolutely exhausted. “Now, what is this?”

“An intervention,” Yusaku announces, also taking a sip. Their eyes meet when he looks up, and it freezes Yusaku in his tracks as he notices how vulnerable Ryoken looks when he’s not trying to hide under onion layers, his eyes almost baby blue because of the intensity of the light, the barely there, remaining roundness of his face reminding Yusaku that he’s not that much older than he is. “We need to stop doing this to each other.”

“Care to elaborate?” Ryoken mumbles, tapping his fingers against his cup. He’s not trying to be rude, Yusaku can tell, but the hour and the fact that he definitively doesn’t want to have this conversation probably don’t help him. “I can think of plenty of things we should stop related to each other.”

“First off, stop being a baby about what happened on Christmas,” Yusaku shakes his head, leaning forward on the table. Ryoken stares him down without mercy, but Yusaku sees a muscle in his jaw tensing in what he can only assume is annoyance. “I had a panic attack that neither of us saw

coming. We didn't know what we would find in that video, and I'm sure that the similarities the experiment shares with the Hanoi Project are not a coincidence."

Ryoken swallows, lips pressing into a tense line. "I still should have known —"

"As I should have. I knew that I was getting into triggering territory when I opened that video file," Yusaku squeezes his eyes shut for a second, willing the memories and his frustration away, then blinks down at his cup, Ryoken's eyes trained on him. "I just want you to know it's not your fault, none of it—if you were a triggering presence for me instead of a soothing one, I would have already run the other way around."

"Do you think it's just that easy? That you telling me to suck it up is going to actually change the way I feel about this?" Ryoken hisses, leaning even closer to Yusaku, but it doesn't have the effect it would if he weren't looking so exhausted, if the desperation behind his eyes were better hidden. "It doesn't work like that."

"I'm aware of that," Yusaku scoffs, almost rolling his eyes. Ryoken raises an insulted eyebrow at him. "But you keep twisting my words. When I say I want a future with you, it doesn't mean that I will force you to it—I just want you to remember you have the option, because you seem to forget about it pretty easily."

Ryoken narrows his eyes, his jaw clenching. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

"You act like you have no future beyond your father's mission, like your whole life spins around it—and I *get it*," At the displeased curl of his lips, Yusaku does roll his eyes, glancing out the window for a moment before speaking. He hated being so open about himself, even if he always made an exception for Ryoken, and he struggled for a few seconds with his tongue before meeting his eyes. "How do you think I became Playmaker? I already told you about how revenge consumed my life—do you think I was just making it up on the Tower?"

At the mention of their duel, Ryoken's eyes narrow thoughtfully and he looks out to the window, bringing his mug up to his lips again. His voice is so soft when he talks next that it almost makes Yusaku sigh. "Of course not. You were being... terribly honest that day."

Yusaku almost grins at that. That's an understatement. "So you know I have experience with these kinds of situations."

"Your speeches were enlightening," Ryoken nods, raising his eyebrows and meeting his gaze. "But perhaps not enough."

"Maybe you just weren't paying enough attention," Yusaku suggests, shooting a smile that's more like a momentary rise of his lips corners at him. Ryoken looks stunned all the same. "But either way— you need to stop distancing yourself from me because of your misconceptions. I can understand if you don't want what I do, but I can't accept you take an accident as an excuse to pull back from everything when you already seemed to be warming up to the idea."

"And what gave you that impression? How do you know I'm not just trying to gain your trust and take the Ignis?" Ryoken tilts his head to the side, eyebrows raised, and Yusaku raises them back. "You didn't bring it to this meeting, after all."

"I didn't bring Ai because he would have made things more complicated, and about the other thing..." Yusaku hums, brings his cup up to his lips, and realizes it's empty. He reaches for the pot to refill, but Ryoken beats him there and pours the coffee for him. "I trust you, Ryoken. The things you did during the rise of the Tower of Hanoi, while I don't approve of them, I could tell they were the last resort, a plan B if I refused to give you Ai and let everything go. And you dueled me fair and square."

It occurs to Yusaku that they shouldn't be talking about this so openly in a public dinner, but the sight of Ryoken bringing his hand up to scrub at his eyes keeps him distracted from this. Ryoken blinks down at his coffee, a frown hanging onto his features, and he glances up at Yusaku before looking back down again, staring at a spot on the table. Yusaku waits for him to talk calmly, sipping slowly from his coffee and squeezing his hands

between his tights to keep them warm when he's not grabbing his cup, once again mourning his lack of gloves.

"I still regret making those decisions, you know? I should have never even given you the option to choose—but I did," Ryoken shakes his head, looking disappointed, Yusaku suddenly having the urge to reach out and take his hand to comfort him. He doesn't, and instead sits on them to avoid those wandering ideas. "I sometimes wish I could take it back."

Yusaku knows he's talking about his father. That's where Ryoken's hangups always come from, it seems, like his father is sitting at the back of his mind looking disapprovingly at every decision he's made and driving him to do what he thinks he would have wanted him to. It's not a good way of spending your day to day, with someone else commanding your choices even though they aren't really there—or *alive*, for that matter. There's a difference in between respecting what someone else you treasured wanted for your life and morphing your life and yourself to fit their ideals. Yusaku barely knows Ryoken, even if he understands him on a deeper level, but he knows he's not like his father and that he's struggling to be what he wanted him to be. After all, Ryoken has proven through his actions time and time again that he feels more guilt and empathy towards the victims of the Lost Incident than his father ever seemed to, and for Yusaku that meant—well, it meant a lot of things, but mostly it just means that Ryoken can be saved still, that he's worth the fight... and that's all he needs to be here, sitting in front of him and trying to get him to understand.

"You're not a bad person, Ryoken," Yusaku says, trying to get his voice to sound as honest and earnest as he can. Ryoken's posture changes from defeated to tense immediately, but Yusaku is already one step ahead of him. "You're not. You like to think you're just as horrible as—as my *captors*, but you aren't, because you actually *care*. You cared enough to look into every victim and find out what happened to Windy's Origin, to accept Takeru's misplaced fury even though you had nothing to do with what happened to his family, and you helped *me*."

Ryoken eyes snap to his face, trying to appear angry, but it's clear that Yusaku's words are having an effect on him that he was not prepared for. "I already told you I regret calling the police—"

“I’m not talking about that—I mean recently,” Yusaku clarifies, bringing his arms up to the table to lean closer, locking his eyes in an intense hold that Ryoken struggles to maintain. “You have interfered when I needed you to the most, and while you can chalk that up to necessity or coincidence, you can’t do that about the fact that you gave me an unfair advantage over your side by not revealing my identity to anyone. Why do you think I told Takeru nothing about you? He barely even knew Revolver was our captor’s son when he found me, and I never bothered to tell him much about what happened at the Tower.”

Yusaku can’t bring himself to call Kogami out by name, despite his hard feelings about him. It’s too close to talking about something that will certainly drive this conversation off track. Still, Ryoken doesn’t seem to mind, his eyebrows shooting up under his fringe as he stares at Yusaku in shock for about two seconds before schooling his expression. “And you have a trustful relationship with him like that?”

“I have explained everything to him since, and apologized about it because he deserved to know those things,” Yusaku grimaces, thinking about how he told him about everything not even a week ago, and Ryoken’s identity hasn’t been a secret for longer than that. It only proves his next point: “I did it as a way to repay the favor—I’m guessing your lieutenants still don’t know about me and that’s why you always meet me alone?”

Ryoken’s eyes narrow, but he nods tightly. “They don’t know about you—only that I have a way to contact you directly. I have kept any information on you available away from them as well...” Ryoken drifts off, signing and leaning his face in his propped up hand, his expression shifting into some disbelief. “I can’t believe you lied to your partner like that just to repay the favor.”

“It wasn’t that hard, to be honest. Most of what I told him was personal, and I don’t like being personal,” Yusaku shrugs, mirroring his position. His coffee has, unfortunately, been getting colder the longer he spends time talking and not drinking it, so Yusaku grabs his cup away to knock down what’s left and pour himself another one—Ryoken does it for him again, and it makes him roll his eyes. “Is any of this conversation getting through your thick skull yet?”

Ryoken's lips quirk up for a second, but he pushes that possible grin down. "You're stubborn. I knew this, of course, but to create a duplicate of a program that took us years to develop only to send me a picture is madness. Who let you do that?"

"No one lets me do anything. I just do it, which is how I got Ai before Hanoi or SOL did," Yusaku takes a sip, and feeling a sneeze coming up his nose, he grabs an unreasonable amount of napkins to blow on them, Ryoken staring with a frown. "I believe I'm at least making some progress here."

Ryoken shrugs innocently, which is an immediate sign that he's hiding his real answer from him. He has a feeling it's not one he likes but that Yusaku would be very happy with, so it's enough to make him relax further. "You may be. How bad is you cold, really?"

"I can walk and think, so that's automatically better than usual," pausing, Yusaku sneezes on a few napkins, and Ryoken leans away slightly in mild disgust. What a baby, honestly. "It's probably because I had a decent meal before it developed."

Ryoken hums and opens his mouth, but the uninterested waitress approaching their table with a tray keeps him quiet. Yusaku frowns, watching as she sets down a plate with two slices of lemon pie on the table, confused, but Ryoken just nods politely, pushing the napkins with Yusaku's germs out the way to make the space more comfortable. The waitress only says one word, with a voice so flat that Yusaku has no doubt that she's ten minutes away from falling asleep on her feet: "Enjoy."

It reminds him of himself for sure, he muses while he stares down at his own slice of pie. "And this is?"

"Dessert," Ryoken shrugs, grabbing his fork and diving into his own piece. Yusaku watches in stunned silence until Ryoken grabs his coffee cup from his sluggish grip and refills it. Again. After this, he pushes it in his direction, gesturing to the pie. "It's not that sweet, but if you don't want it I can eat it."

“I’m guessing this is a midnight craving of yours,” Yusaku mumbles and then takes a bite of the pie. Truth to be told, it’s actually not *that* sweet, though it has way too much whipped cream for his taste. Silently, Yusaku scoops it all up and drops it on Ryoken’s plate without shame, who only seems to accept this gratefully. “It can’t be worse than Takeru’s, to be honest.”

“About that,” Ryoken lifts his fork, pointing at Yusaku with it like he just gave him an idea. Yusaku wipes his cream stained fingers on a napkin, watching him as he gathers his words. “How do I fit into that part of your life? Hypothetically.”

Yusaku raises his eyebrows. “Hypothetically, what do you mean?”

“Soulburner hates my guts, and I’m sure Kusanagi Shoichi must also have some hard feelings towards me,” Ryoken starts to list them off with his finger, which looks comical, considering he’s still holding his fork and looking at Yusaku with intense eyes. It sounds like a silly question, but Yusaku can tell that this is Ryoken’s way of bringing up another issue related to Yusaku’s life and his place in it, that’s it, in a very roundabout way. “Let’s not even mention that annoying AI. I don’t think they would approve of me being such a big presence in your life.”

“You’ve always been an important presence in my life,” Yusaku corrects, and watches with a self-satisfied grin how Ryoken almost chokes in a bite of pie at that. “And you’re right, they won’t like it that much, but they’ll adapt. Also, Takeru doesn’t hate you. Ai already gave you his blessing.”

Ryoken seems rather conflicted by that last part. “So you’ll just make them accept it?”

“If they want to be in my life as well, then yes,” Yusaku shrugs—he’s not asking anyone to become best friends, but it would be nice if they could at least be in the same room. Takeru didn’t trust Ryoken, and Kusanagi-san even less so with valid reasons, but all he wanted was civility at the very least. More importantly, though: “Your Knights are the problem—”

“Hypothetically.” Ryoken reminds him, and Yusaku rolls his eyes.

“... hypothetically, your Knights are the problem. Spectre... would probably enjoy to rile Takeru up way too much,” Yusaku points out, frowning, and Ryoken makes a strangled sound, wincing at that mental image. “As for the rest... they should be in prison.”

Ryoken frowns, looking down at the remnants of his pie. Yusaku has barely touched his, but it’s mostly because he doesn’t want to upset his stomach. “I don’t think bringing them into this conversation will do anything for us. They are well aware of their roles, and I can’t control them. They’re adults, and they chose to continue with the mission on their own volition.”

Yusaku nods, looking out of the window at the snow that’s been accumulating. It’s heavy, so he’s relieved he brought his boots instead of his sneakers, but the sight of it makes him want to sigh in nostalgia. He remembers, vaguely, that he used to like snow as a kid, thought it was really pretty and fun to play with, but he has no idea where those memories come from, coming up empty every time he tries to recall something from that period of time. Now, snow was little more than a nuisance, but perhaps that was just another thing that could change with time.

“Are we done here, then?” Ryoken asks softly, and Yusaku turns his head to find him staring. He still looks exhausted, but his eyes aren’t looking that guarded anymore, so it’s clear that the words they exchanged have helped him relax, some worries probably wiped from his mind. “Or is there something else?”

‘I want you to stay’, are the words that come to Yusaku, but he can’t request that yet. This conversation, he feels, it’s not going to be their last one, and they’re probably going to be butting heads often, but it’s a nice prelude for what’s to come as the events around them develop. Yusaku just hopes everything turns out fine.

“Well, I was hoping to get a ride home,” he shrugs, pushing the rest of his pie towards him. Ryoken rolls his eyes, lips quirking up as he finishes it, not even bothering to switch Yusaku’s fork for his own. “It would be foolish to hope this conversation is going to make you change sides, wouldn’t it?”

Ryoken glances at him like he's not sure whether Yusaku's joking or not, but answers honestly. "I still need to think things over. I can't just give up on what I believe, and I'm glad you understand that but that you also aren't afraid to call me out," he pauses, hesitating, and then shrugs awkwardly. "I guess you can count me in as intrigued."

"That's better than what I was picturing," Yusaku reveals. Ryoken shakes his head in disbelief, looking amazed at what just happened here, at them successfully having an honest conversation without upsetting or making each other angry. He stands up and Yusaku follows, already stuffing his hands in his pockets to prepare himself to face the cold air, and as Ryoken opens the door for them, Yusaku can't keep himself from asking: "Friends, then?"

Ryoken's eyebrows raise, he opens his mouth—

"Hey, pretty boy!" The waitress calls, and they both turn towards her, startled. She's sitting on the counter now, looking at her nails, but she's pointing at somewhere above them with her nail file. She stifles a yawn, and her voice is uninterested when she elaborates. "That's mistletoe, and I got orders to make sure it gets used, so please, finish your date with a bang."

Yusaku frowns. "This is not a *date*—"

"Yusaku," Ryoken interrupts, grabbing his arm, and his expression looks carefully empty and weird when he turns back to him. He has a bad feeling about this. "It's fine, let's just do it and go."

Yusaku stares at him in shock. Let's just do it and go? What the actual fuck was he on about? He opens his mouth to vocalize these thoughts, but before he can do so, the waitress clears her throat rather obnoxiously, but still not looking at them. Yusaku meets Ryoken's eyes and he's mortified to realize he's blushing, Ryoken's eyebrows raising as he catches the flush, and he leans closer into his space to whisper.

"*Scared, Playmaker?*" It's a purr of his voice that makes Yusaku's heart go crazy inside his chest, and he quickly considers the pros and cons of doing

this. First, he gets to go home back to his bed sooner, there's no one around but Ryoken to witness this, *he gets to kiss Ryoken*—

Ah, what the hell, Yusaku thinks, and then reaches up to grab at Ryoken's coat, pull him down, and smash their lips together awkwardly. Ryoken steps closer immediately, which makes Yusaku tilt his head back, and he keeps his mouth closed tightly, his eyes squeezed to avoid looking at his shame. About a second passes in which they just stand there, but then Ryoken chuckles, brings a hand up to grab Yusaku's chin and moves it back and up, their lips brushing against each other closely, and a rush of electricity zaps down his spine, making him release a sharp breath. Ryoken, apparently enjoying this embarrassment, puckers up his lips to properly plant a kiss on his lips, Yusaku feels the gentle brush of a wet, hot tongue that almost makes him jump and then Ryoken steps back, ceasing all physical contact.

He opens the door again, smirking at Yusaku and licking his lips. “Ready to go now?”

Yusaku's brain seems to have stopped working and is slowly rebooting, so he only nods and steps out, feeling nothing more than the heat on his face, the quickness of his breath, and the crazy racing of his heart. Ryoken does not look nearly as affected as Yusaku is, and the waitress didn't even seem to truly care, so Yusaku is left very, very confused.

When they get into the car, Ryoken glances at the key holder, bites his lips, and then grabs his gloves and pushes them in Yusaku's direction. “Here,” he says, and there's no indecision in his tone. Yusaku takes them, and then stares at him. “Christmas present. I noticed you have none.”

“I can't accept this—” Yusaku starts, but Ryoken clicks his tongue and shakes his head, starting the car and pulling out of the parking lot.

“Keep them, I insist,” he locks eyes with Yusaku, and his expression lets him know there's no way out of this. So, with a sigh and a blush, Yusaku puts them on, immediately enjoying the softness and the warmth they supply his hands with.

“Thank you,” he says, voice soft, and Ryoken stares at him for a second too long before shrugging and looking back at the road. “I appreciate it.”

“No problem,” he answers, voice dismissive and, dare Yusaku think, embarrassed. The drive back to his apartment is quiet but not uncomfortable after that, a Christmas tune filling the silence for them, and he relaxes as they drive back into familiar streets and approach his home, the coziness of the gloves soothing his stiff hands.

Once Ryoken parks the car outside his building, Yusaku steps out of without saying a word and climbs the stairs up to the front door of the building, but stops halfway when Ryoken’s voice calls from behind. He turns, finds him with the window pulled down to talk, and waits, anticipation rising in his throat.

“Friends?” Ryoken asks, lips pulled into a playful smirk, and Yusaku shakes his head incredulously, unable to stop a grin from taking over his lips. Ryoken waits, watching him with eyes that appear to be twinkling from the distance.

Yusaku nods, running his hand through his hair in disbelief, liking how Ryoken’s gloves, dark and smooth, don’t catch on it. “Sure. I’ll see you around.”

Ryoken performs a mocking salute while winking, the smirk not falling off his lips, pulls up his window and drives away. Yusaku stares until the car disappears from view and enters his apartment feeling lighter than he has in ages, taking his time pulling off his jacket and boots, letting the gloves for last and handling them softly as he comes into the living room.

“Yusaku-chan! You’re back!” Ai shrieks, looking over from his spot on top of Roboppy head, standing up on the Duel Disk. Roboppy welcomes him happily, approaching him and almost making Ai fall off, but he keeps his balance. “How did it go!? You look the closest to happy I’ve ever seen you!”

Yusaku shrugs, trying to wipe the smile off his lips, and walks further into the apartment and into his room, Roboppy and Ai following closely behind.

“It was fine. We worked some things out.”

Ai looks at him critically in silence as Yusaku opens one his drawers to drop the gloves inside, and then clicks his fingers together. “Aha! Something juicy happened, didn’t it? Your face has color on it!”

“My face always has color on it, Ai,” Yusaku shakes his head, throwing himself on his bed and burying his face in his pillow. “Go away, I’m going to sleep.”

Ai grumbles something under his breath that Yusaku doesn’t bother paying attention to, and he takes the silence as a chance to think over their conversation slowly. In the end, he has a good feeling about their dynamic moving forwards, and he could only hope to never be faced with a so out of control issue again—

A harsh series of sneezes interrupts his thoughts, and after it’s over, Yusaku remembers their kiss, Ryoken licking his lips afterward, him eating his pie with the same fork, and snorts, almost choking in his own breath as he recovers from the sneezes.

Serves him right, I hope he gets sick, Yusaku thinks, and then, with a heavy sigh and a grin, he drifts off to sleep.

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(Ryoken is, admittedly, pretty happy with their talk. He didn’t know what to expect when his phone chimed with a notification displaying that Yusaku

sent a picture, and his fear when he saw the apparent error on the code was very, very real, as was the relief when Yusaku told him it was a fake.

He still has things to think over, and tasks to complete, a whole week worth of grumpiness to apologize for, but he feels like he can wait until the Light Ignis is defeated before coming to a decision— he has his own long term plans brewing, after all.

The kiss— Ryoken would never admit to it, not even under the threat of death, but it was probably the highlight of his year, which wasn't saying much, considering his father did pass away and all the other loses. When he comes back to the boat, Spectre is intrigued with his suddenly changed behavior from “don't even look at me” to suspiciously happy, and Vyra has this knowing look in her eye that worries him.

All in all, Ryoken may be looking forward to the future, as uncertain as it was.

Wait, he thinks, thinking back at his meeting with Yusaku, did he take his laptop with him?

Well, shit.)

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you for reading! This was fun 😊

Like I mentioned, I already have a few ideas for other works on this verse, so look forward to that someday! I'll probably take a break to work on other wips, but I hold this fic close to my heart so I'm sure I'll be back at it sooner than even I'm expecting.

Thank you again for the kind comments and the support. I hope you liked this :)

Author's Note:

Thank you for reading! I hope that if you made it this far you had a good time and that you liked it! Have a good day! Thanks!